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A JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

Religion in the Digital Age

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Editorial

The world is running today on the steam of information. No wonder then, that the levers of power are in the hands of those who let flow or control information. This situation is created by computer-mediated communication. It is radically changing every domain of life, and is creating a new outlook on the world, a different culture, and is giving rise to a knowledge economy. While all segments of life are undergoing profound transformation, could religion remain unaffected?

The question this issue of Jeevadhara poses, then, is this: How does the digital technology get reflected in the approach to such crucial issues in the traditional religions as the sense of the sacred symbols, belief-system, rituals, authority, morals, gender, spirituality, theology and relationship with other religions?

Essays appearing in this number address such questions, and provide us as well with theories and frameworks to be able to understand the developing new religious situation. They also raise critical questions concerning the nature of the information society that is emerging, the culture that is spreading and the crisis of justice that is threatening. These are concerns which challenge all religions to rethink themselves and enter into a new and creative praxis.

The Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, is known for venturing into new frontiers of thought and for researching on crucial issues that affect our world and society. The Department was fully involved in research for the past several months in preparing this volume of Jeevahdara. In fact, the various articles in this issue were written by the faculty members and research scholars of the Department. I wish to express my sincere appreciation to all the colleagues for their deep interest in the issue and the stimulating discussion-sessions, and not the least, for their written contributions which make up the current issue.

The articles are written not only for the benefit of Christian readers, but also in view of a broader readership of scholars belonging to various religious traditions and ideologies, the interaction with whom will certainly benefit a meaningful rethinking of Christianity and its theology.

I realize that the theme is vast, and the current issue of the journal touches only the tip of the iceberg. Nevertheless, it has the merit of bringing to the attention of the scholars an issue that would need much creative thinking in the future.

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Felix Wilfred

Knowledge - Economy and Religion

Gnana Patrick

The author of this contribution is a lecturer in the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras. In this essay, after presenting the concept of knowledge-economy, Dr Patrick tries to take a look at the way religion functioned in the 'habitat' of the previous economic systems (especially in India) in order to arrive at an understanding of the way it is performing in today's context of knowledge-economy. The author is arguing that religion in the feudal economic habitat had a role in relation to the agenda of dominance, in the capitalist system, played an instrumental role in the modernist programmes of the industrial society, and now, in the habitat of knowledge-economy, serves as reflexive resources for the constitution of religions by autonomous individuals. This essay is an analytical attempt to argue that the knowledge-economy provides a congenial climate for the *constitution* of religions against the background of the reflexive modernisation of the contemporary capitalist era.

Introduction

Religion engages humanity in innovative and creative ways, at every epoch. The different historical stages, reckoned in terms of social, cultural, and even economic activity of human beings bear witness to this creative dimension of religion. The expressive forms as well as the internalised cognitive schemes of religions do acquire innovative attributes and performances, depending upon the specific configuration of social, cultural and economic factors. Even during the contemporary capitalist era of high-modernity and 'knowledge-economy', religion engages humanity creatively and innovatively.

The concern of this short essay is to identify the way in which religion plays its role in the habitat of knowledge-economy. A sequential order of feudal, industrial-capitalist, and late-capitalist stages is followed in the analysis of religion, more from the need of a comparative cognisance of religion at different historical stages, and not so much to

compartmentalise history on the basis of these schemes. In fact, what we address as feudal, industrial-capital, and late-capital are not stages which have succeeded one after the other in a neat fashion, but which remain mingled in multiple mutations due to the spatio-temporal factors. India, for example, has all the three economic systems still operative in its different regions - both geographically and socially. Therefore what is intended here is to present the stages more from the need of a comparative perception.

Knowledge-economy is perhaps the central feature of today's economic process. It would do well to take a descriptive and analytical look at this reality of knowledge-economy, before exploring into the interface between the present-day economic process and religion.

1. Knowledge-Economy

The concept of 'knowledge-economy' has come to occupy a significant place in the contemporary economic 'discourse.'[1] It stands for the present-day economic process, whereby the core activities of economy, i.e. manufacturing, distributing, and consuming are increasingly becoming 'knowledge-intensive' and even been 'conditioned' by the 'knowledge-industries' that explore, develop, and maintain infinitely new forms of knowledge, which in turn augment the ongoing process of globalisation. By 'knowledge-industries' is meant all those firms which, aided by 'expert' or 'abstract systems' (information and communication systems or structures), involve in storing, analysing, and interpreting the huge data generated by innumerable researches done in every field of human life.

Knowledge-economy, emergent in the contemporary society, is characteristically a post-industrial capitalist phenomenon. Whether we are at the moment living in a 'post-industrial' society or not is a point of debate. Theoreticians like Daniel Bell (speaking of 'post-industrial society') and Scot Lash & John Urry (speaking about the end of 'organised capitalism') assert the emergence of a *post-industrial society*, and others, especially the system-theorists like Immanuel Wallerstein

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1 For a discussion on knowledge-economy, cf. John H. Dunning (ed), *Regions, Globalisation, and the Knowledge-based Economy*. OUP, 2000; Scott Lash and John Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space*, New Delhi: SAGE, 1994; Stephen Cullenberg, et al. *Postmodernism, Economics and Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 2001.

and Jameson Frederic, speak not about a discontinuous 'post' industrial society, but a continuous *'late-capitalist'* society. Be the debate as it may, that knowledge-economy is characteristic of the present-day economic process is a consensus point agreed by all.

Economic commentators or analysts agree that this knowledge-economy is of recent origin, say of the past two to three decades. This, according to them, is characteristically different from the economic processes of the previous era. It differs not merely from a feudal mode whose mainstay was the agrarian economy, but also from an industrial capitalist economy. It will be in place to take a look at the central features that distinguish and constitute the present-day knowledge-economy.

Central Features of Knowledge-Economy

As with any other economic system, knowledge-economy is also known by its phenomenological features. And, in a dialectical sense, it is these features that progressively constitute the knowledge-economy. We will do well to take a quick look at the central features of knowledge-economy.

Informationalisation of Economy

First and foremost, it is the explosion of 'information', which is the central and defining feature of the knowledge-economy. Some commentators address knowledge-economy as 'informationalisation of economy' too. It is,in the words of Timothy Luke, an "'informationalisation' of the social means of production, consumption and administration," that has taken place "during and after the 1960s when the global impact of mass telecommunications, electronic computerization, cybernetic automation and rapid transportation began to be experienced broadly around the world."[2]

Arjo Klamer, another economic theorist, speaks about the present day economic process as something centred around "new information-processing machines, specifically computers" instead of the "productivist machines that stood as the central metaphor"[3] of the earlier economic

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2 Luke Timothy, "New World Order or Neo-World Orders: Power, Politics and Ideology in Informationalizing Glocalities", in Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson (eds), *Global Modernities*. SAGE, 1992, p. 92.

3 Arjo Klamer, "Late modernism and the loss of Character in Economics" in

era. Timothy Luke locates the knowledge-economy within three spheres, that he considers, in relation to the economic activities of human beings: one, the natural biosphere, wherein the agricultural economy flourished, second, the industrial technosphere, where the industrial capitalist productions thrived, and now, third, the 'information sphere', wherein the knowledge-economy flourishes."[4]

In a similar vein, Daniel Bell, one who pioneered the concept of the 'post-industrial society', speaks about the three major phases of economic activity in human history as:

In a pre-industrial world, life is a game against nature in which men wrest their living from the soil, the waters, or the forests, working usually in small groups, subject to the vicissitudes of nature. In an industrial society, work is a game against fabricated nature, in which men become dwarfed by machines as they turn out goods and things. But in a post-industrial world, work is primarily a 'game between persons' (between bureaucrat and client, doctor and patient, teacher and student, or within research groups, office groups, service groups)".[5]

Thus, in the opinion of the theoreticians, informationlisation becomes the top-most defining feature of knowledge-economy.

Knowledge as the Intangible Asset

John Dunning, who has edited a volume on knowledge-economy, speaks about a shift from tangible assets to intangible assets. In his own words: "Over the last three centuries, the main source of wealth in market economies has switched from natural assets (notably land and relatively unskilled labour), through tangible created assets (notably buildings, machinery and equipment, and finance), to intangible created assets (notably knowledge and information of all kinds), which may be embodied in human beings, in organizations, or in physical assets."[6]

Stephen Cullenberg, et al. *Postmodernism, Economics and Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 2001, p. 98.

4 Luke Timothy, "New World Order or Neo-World Orders...", p. 91.

5 Daniel Bell, "The Coming of Post-Industrial Society," in Lawrence E. Cahoone (ed), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology,* Blackwell Publishers, 1996, p. 430.

6 John Dunning, *Regions, Globalisation, and the Knowledge-based* Economy, p. 8.

Quoting the transformation of economy that has taken place in the US within the past two to three decades - for example, it has been estimated that "whereas in the 1950s, 80 percent of the value added in US manufacturing industry represented primary or processed foodstuffs, materials, or mineral products, and 20 percent knowledge, by 1995, these proportions had changed to 30 and 70 percent respectively"[7] - Dunning argues for the emergence of intangible assets in the form of knowledge. Knowledge here becomes part of the capital investment of the present-day industries.

Predominance of Service-Sectors

Yet another defining feature of knowledge-economy is the predominance service-sectors, i.e., firms, organisations, and institutes those provide services, which are closely linked to the economic activities. Some samples of the service-sector activities characterising knowledge-economy are: trade documentation, trade finance, insurance, business negotiation, market research, arbitration, marketing and promotion, material sourcing, testing and certification, quality control, sample making/prototyping, managerial functions, customer servicing and support, sales and marketing, finance and accounting, etc. Countries, which move in full steam in the late-capitalist economic process, have transformed themselves into service-sectoral countries in a fast mode. Hong Kong, for example, is a singular case in point. As Enright Michael analyses in terms of its overall economic structure, Hong Kong has seen a substantial shift from manufacturing to services over the last two decades. In 1980, manufacturing represented 24 per cent of Hong Kong's output and 42 per cent of its employment. By 1996, manufacturing accounted for 7 per cent of output and 13 per cent of employment... By 1996, services accounted for 84.4 per cent of output making Hong Kong more service-oriented than any national economy in the world.[8]

Here we find a typical economy, which turns service-oriented in a fast mode, embodying the economic trend of the time. Such a shift is

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7 Ibid.

8 Michale J. Enright, "Globalisation, Regionalization, and the Knowledge-Based Economy in Hong Kong", in Dunning, John H. (ed). 2000. *Regions, Globalisation, and the Knowledge-based Economy*. OUP, p. 385.

made possible by transformation taking place in the sphere of knowledge-economy.

Cultural Industries and Aesthetic Designing of Life

One notices the sudden proliferation of cultural industries in recent times. Media-related activity has gained economic importance. It is manifest in the fact that multinational companies are vying with one another to capture the cultural markets, and the rights to export cultural products. Cultural products come in the form of screen-related products such as films, documentaries, etc, and also in the form of fashion-designs, costumes and cosmetics, and several other consumerist products.

Such a preponderance of cultural industries contributes to an overly aestheticization of life. As a result, design-oriented economic activities are proliferating, capitalising on the aesthetic mood that is infused into the veins of the society through the cultural industries. Not merely dress materials, but even such things as food, medicines, transportations, etc have become highly design-oriented. All these changes owe their existence to the knowledge-industries that keep on researching and innovating.

Knowledge in its Width than in its Depth

Behind this process of the unfolding of knowledge-economy, one finds a shift in the very understanding of the reality of knowledge. It is a shift from taking knowledge in its depth dimension to treating it in its width; it is a change from treating it as a metaphysical reality, to something taken more as a constructed reality; it is a turn from looking at it in its vertical dimension to engaging with it in its horizontal dimension; it is, as if, taking it out from its preserved enclaves to making it more participatory and democratic.

In a pre-modern traditional society, knowledge was understood as something given, or "revealed", the content of which was intelligible only to an expert such as a sage, saint, priest, etc or to those who were initiated. Knowledge was understood to have a metaphysical foundation, which was sacred in character, and this was believed to be the element that provided certain depth to knowledge, both in its content and method.

As modernity unfolded, the understanding of the character of knowledge too changed. It became more a logical project, the content of which was to be 'discovered' through rigorous methods of verification

and falsification. This modernist understanding grounded it on a human rational self, starting with Descartes' Cogito, which became the foundation for knowledge.

Today, knowledge is understood as 'self-referential', in the sense that it is intelligible in its own terms and not in terms of any extraneous reality. This self-referentiality of knowledge delinks it from external validation, and makes it more and more individual-centred. As observed by Paul Heelas, "rather than authority and legitimacy resting with established orders of knowledge, authority (today) comes to rest with the person (assuming, of course, that the subject remains cohesive enough, intact enough, to exercise authority).[9]

These, then, are the central features and characteristics that manifest as well as constitute the knowledge-economy today. It is now our task to explore how religion performs in this habitat of knowledge-economy. In order to understand the performance of religion better, we shall take a look at the way it has functioned in the previous economic systems.

2. Feudal Economy and Religion

Land was the primary asset, and agriculture was the central economic activity in a feudal economic system. Though the actual producers were those that tilled the land as agricultural labourers, the landowner remained the hub of the economic activity. The landowner was either an individual or a corporate person. In the classical feudal set-up, especially in India, more often than not, the landowner was a corporate person, in the form of a temple, a monarch, or a princely state.

Such a feudal economic structure went with a typical feudal social organisation. The feudal mode of production was optimised with a corresponding principle of social hierarchy. Individuals were located, depending upon the type of system in vogue (aristocracy-serf type of system of the West or the caste system of India), at different 'fixed' points in the social hierarchy. By fixing an individual at a particular position, the feudal society held an oppressive hold on the individual. It restricted and exploitatively paralysed the mobility of an individual, in social as well as economic dimensions. In India, the caste system served as a typical form of the 'logic of the feudal system'. And, under

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9 Paul Heelas (ed),. *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, Blackwell Publishers, 1998, p. 5.

the grinding mill of this caste system, not merely individuals, but also communities - ethnic, racial, and cultural - were crushed.

Some of the classical knowledge systems, produced within this feudal context, were to embody a hierarchical vision of reality. Knowledge emerged from esoteric 'disclosures' to sages or gurus, and got reproduced through a hierarchical system. Dependency was an important factor to reckon with in the production of knowledge. The disciple - an individual or a community - depended on the guru, and in several cases, the guru depended on the ruler. Knowledge remained a captive to the landowning ruler at this feudal habitat.

Religious consciousness, manifest in the classical traditions of this society, had the shades of feudal social organisation inscribed into it. In the Indian panorama of the vast expanse of religious consciousness, the text-based religious thought, more often than not, constructed a "sacred canopy" that embodied a universal vision infused with the feudal hierarchical principle. The Advaitic religious consciousness, postulating a monistic vision of reality, positioned certain social category of people closer to the heart of the monistic vision, and others at the periphery. This centre-periphery positioning, though 'piously intended' to induce a centrifugal movement of the periphery towards the centre, in effect, paralysed those at the periphery by freezing their locations.

It needs be noted that, other variants of the religious consciousness of the feudal society sought to remedy this paralysing effect. Bhakti religious traditions sought to affirm the principle of difference by proposing the binary of bhakta and the Lord. This was to free the bhaktas to experience their own individuality and identity. However, the net result was not much of a change. Paradoxically though, it contributed to a specifically feudal social organisation premised on the hierarchical principle of the landlord-agricultural labourer akin to the Lord-Bhakta binary. Bhakti religious literature that eulogised such relationships, presented a religious romanticism of the bhakta-Lord relationship taking it to the dizzy heights of soliciting the sacrifice of the slaves to the masters, corresponding to the sacrifice of the devotee to the Lord. That these religious virtues corresponded with such values of feudal economy as loyalty, sacrifice, dedication and surrender of the slave to the master cannot be taken as a simple case of coincidence.

This was not the whole. There were religious sites of the subaltern sections of the people too. The subaltern religious consciousness did

indeed suffer from the 'contradictory consciousness', as proposed by Antonio Gramsci. It got co-opted, and as in the Srinivasian terms, got 'sanskritized' by the monistic vision of the text-based religious tradition. It, thus, tied the subaltern psyche with the rope of the monistic religious tradition. And the subaltern individual accepted the position more due to fear than to passivity. Because as Adam Smith said, "the authority of religion is superior to every other authority. The fears which it suggests conquer all other fears."[10]

However, there were also a few rare sites of resistance and affirmation of the subaltern psyche in and through the religious idioms, which were considered as 'rustic', 'abhorrent', 'wild', etc by the dominant religio-cultural traditions. Such sites, with their unique symbolic negotiations, served to resist the onslaught of the workings of the feudal economy. Barring few such instances, the religious consciousness of the subaltern people was too feeble to stand up to the feudal economic system and the oppressive religio-cultural tradition that legitimised and maintained it.

Dominance, Resistance, and Religion

In such a feudal economic system, 'dominance and control' of the labouring class of people by the owners of the labour process was undeniably an essential factor, under whose fine operation the system depended. Dominance and control within the economic process went with its corollaries in the other systems like society, culture, and politics. Religion as a form of consciousness, as available among the dominant traditions of the feudal society, remained inextricably merged with the agenda of domination. It would only take an exercise of deconstruction of these traditions to expose religion's linkage with the scheme of domination. Thus religion in the feudal habitat had a role vis-à-vis dominance and control.

This being the case with the dominant tradition, the reality of religion that operated with the dominated people, however feeble though, organised itself in terms of responding to the system of domination. In its own way, it resisted, contested, and negotiated the reality of domination under which its adherents suffered. Thus, though in a limited manner, religion also functioned as a manner of contesting the dominance of the feudal economic habitat.

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10 Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Bentham Classic, p. 1007.

3. Industrial Capitalist Economy and Religion

Feudal society gave way to or, as in many third world countries, gradually is giving way to capitalist societies. A capitalist society is characterized by a form of social organization based on increasing differentiation or 'distantiation' of functional roles, or in economic terms, increasing differentiation of the division of labour. An industrial capitalist society, which is the classical model of the capitalist society, which goes along with the early phase of modernity, in its own unique manner, set in motion the process of autonomisation of the individual. It liberated the individual from the clutches of feudal relationships, and set in motion the emergence of the autonomous individual, whose labour was employed 'freely' by an industrial employer.

This industrial capitalist economy brought in the social process known as modernization, and its philosophy of modernity. This process implied the emergence of the institution of democratic states, institutions of civil society, freedom of expression enhanced by the modern equipments of press, and other communication systems.

During this phase of economic process, religion had become the resource for some of the modernist projects humanity had undertaken in its history. The project of Enlightenment stands as a singular modernist project the West had seen during the onward march of the capitalist economy. Religion became a reliable resource to promote the Enlightenment values of progress, dignity and liberty to the individual, etc. It also became the driving force behind the 'civilising' mission undertaken by the Western Christian missionary enterprise. Nationalism was yet another modernist programme that had integrated the religious resources in a conspicuous manner into its workings. Starting with Martin Luther's Reformation, one finds many an example, wherein religion had become an integral part of the emerging nationalist spirit of the times. Religion helped organize the political 'imagined communities'. Especially the symbols of religion became highly potent resources in the project of nationalism. In countries, where the hold of religions was deep-rooted, the religious resources contributed substantially to the organization of the Nation-States that emerged at the denouement of the erstwhile colonialism. The Gandhian use of the religious symbol of Ram Rajya for inspiring, energizing, and mobilizing the masses for achieving the Indian political freedom is a case in point.

Religion, during this phase, also served as an important resource for other emancipatory projects of social, cultural, racial, and ethnic groups, which found themselves in situations of subordination, and oppression. The emergence in the Indian context of socio-religious movements at the juncture of introduction of the capitalist modernisation evidences this fact. Leaders who emerged from among the subaltern people invariably integrated the religious resources in their vision and practice of emancipation. India, even being fertile in religions, has also generated a number of such socio-religious movements for emancipation.[11]

The Instrumentality of Religion

Knowledge in the capitalist modernist habitat had lost its esoteric roots, but was premised, for its authentication, on a universal rational self. There took place an internalisation of the source of authentication of knowledge. The rational self, as a foundational basis for knowledge, began to occupy the consciousness of humanity. This turn of events had a rational and instrumental project for the self. The self had to progress, develop, emancipate, etc. on the basis of universal principles.

The Nation-States, the modern counterpart of the feudal sovereign, embodied this project of the self. And knowledge for the agency of the Nation-States became instrumental rather than metaphysical. It became an instrument of materializing the modern vision of development and progress. In view of this instrumentality, knowledge was shorn of its amorphous and esoteric characteristics in order to suit the modernist project. As observed by Luke Timothy, "in creating their modes of sovereignty and modernity, national state structures disclaimed commitments to or discharged engagements with the pre-modern practices or oral (informal) knowledge, particular (practical) culture, local (communal) interests and timely (grounded popular) issues attached to local/regional politics in order to impose a disciplinary normalization rooted in modern theories of written (formal) knowledge, general (national) culture, universal (state) interests and timeless (abstract historical) issues tied into the national/international politics of the capitalist system..."[12]

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11 For an understanding of such movements, cf. M.S.A. Rao, *Social Movements in India*, Manoharlal, ; Kenneth Thomson, *Socio-Religious Movements in India*, OUP; Stephen Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets*, ; etc.

12 Luke Timothy, "New World Order or Neo-World Orders...", p. 95.

Thus a universal modernist knowledge was solicited by the capitalist modernity.

Religion had its convergence with instrumental knowledge too. Religious authority got integrated with the modern authority of knowledge, which was the rational self. This authority gave knowledge and religion universal missions. This endeavoured to gather humanity under scientific utopias of development and progress. Interestingly, science, though sounded to be antagonistic to religion, cohered congenially to the scientific project - because both worked on certain authoritative forms of knowledge. Science and religion mutually reinforced one another on the point of postulating certain valid source of universal knowledge. Religion, if and when freed from vested interests, solicited the progress of science, and science in turn, in and through its 'faith' in rationality, held religion without getting fragmented. Thus religion had an instrumental role to play in the industrial capitalist habitat.

4. Late-Capitalist Economy and Religion

The industrial capitalist economy is being superseded, not uniformly though, by the late capitalist economy, which is known variously as the high-capitalism or advanced capitalism. The primary characteristic of this high-capitalism, as discussed in the first part of the essay, is the emergence of the reality of knowledge-economy, and its increasing control over the economic process in the era of globalisation. This knowledge-economy is said to induce a sociological process of 'reflexive modernisation' in today's world. We will take a look at this phenomenon of reflexive modernisation, as a step towards understanding its relation to the function of religion today.

Knowledge Economy and Reflexive Modernisation

Reflexive modernisation, as noted by some prominent Western sociologists (Anthony Giddens, Scot Lash and John Urry, Smart Barry, Anthony Elliot, etc), is becoming today an important sociological process, induced by the knowledge-economy of the high-modernity of globalisation. It is to be seen, according to them, especially in the lives of those (primarily the urbanites) who partake of the process of modernisation, operative at the contemporary globalisation context. This modernisation is characteristically different from the earlier industrial modernisation in that the contemporary one is substantially influenced by the nature and functions of knowledge-economy. Herein, the labour process is increasingly being conditioned by the very process of

production of knowledge, and the very labour process becomes reflexive. "This is reflexive in the sense that the labour process involves self-monitoring - the labour process becomes the object of the labour process."[13]

In terms of its impact upon the life of an individual, while the industrial modernisation supported the formation of a unitary self that progressed along the Enlightenment-axis, the contemporary modernisation provides a habitat wherein there takes place, on the one hand, a 'de-centring' of self, and on the other, a process of continuous 'reconstructions' of newer selves.

It is this type of modernisation, which is said to induce reflexivity in the lives of the people. Reflexivity means basically the cognitive capacity to 'self-monitor' one's course of action (Giddens), or the psychological ability to re-envision one's selfhood, or even the aesthetic ability to 'hermeneutically' exist in today's context (Scot Lash). It is a kind of meta-consciousness or awareness on the very process of self-awareness itself. Paraphrasing Giddens, Anthony Elliot speaks of reflexivity as "a self-defining process that depends upon monitoring of, and reflection upon, psychological and social information about possible trajectories of life."[14] "The reflexivity of modern social life", writes Giddens, "consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character."[15] Individuals' understanding of his/her self undergoes, as Giddens notes, a "chronic revision in the light of new information or knowledge."[16] Against this development, as Barry Smart concludes, "what we experience and know as modernity is formed through endless process of reflexive structuring, de-structuring and restructuring in which forms of knowledge are generated and adopted or applied..."[17] This, then, is the way knowledge-economy and reflexive modernisation are linked to one another.

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13 Scot Lash and Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space*, p. 71.

14 Anthony Elliot, *Concepts of the Self*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001, p. 37.

15 As quoted in Ibid., p. 37.

16 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Polity Press, 1991, p. 20.

17 Smart Barry, *Facing Modernity: Ambivalence, Reflexivity and Morality*, SAGE, 1999, p. 69.

Religion and Knowledge-Economy

Earlier in this essay, we have considered religion in relation to the previous feudal and industrial capitalist economic systems. It is now in place to reflect upon the reality of religion as it obtains against the present-day economic process, characterised substantially by knowledge-economy.

Knowledge-economy seems to provide a congenial climate for the functioning of religion. Religion begins to operate in multiple designs today. Its reinvigorated presence may owe its existence to a considerable part to the present-day 'reflective mood' of humanity, a mood induced by several happenings of the twentieth century, starting with the linguistic turn introduced by the philosophical reflections carried out at the turn of the twentieth century. The present-day human engagement with culture, aesthetics, etc, and the preponderance of the culture-industries in the labour process are some expressions of the 'reflective mood' humanity finds itself in. This 'reflective mood' of humanity is, so to say, aided and abetted by the knowledge-economy and its reflexive modernisation.

We may well state that reflexivity of the reflexive modernisation is an important element in the understanding of the role and functions of religion in the contemporary context. When considered more empirically, the functions of reflexivity seem to overlap with that of religion. Let us take a step-by-step analysis of the interface between reflexive modernisation and religion.

Knowledge, Reflexivity and Organisation of the Self

While relating knowledge, reflexivity and the self, one is faced with two different orientations of the self. One is an orientation of possibility, and the other is that of uncertainty. Possibility is in terms of the opportunities, and the uncertainty is in terms of the ensuing dilemma. Let us take a brief look at these two orientations:

"The reflexivity of modernity extends into the core of the self. Put in another way, in the context of a post-traditional order, the self becomes a reflexive project"[18] - comments Giddens on the contemporary process of modernisation. With the facility offered by knowledge-economy, an individual who partakes of the late-modernity, is enabled to organise

18 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 32

her/his self, by de-constructing the given self, and re-constructing or reconstituting a new self in the light of the ever-new knowledge on different aspects of life, such as health, job-placements, aesthetics, psychology, etc, etc. The emergence of the discipline of Human Resource Management is typical of the reflexive modern sciences, which undergird the project of organising the human self. Such a possibility is enabling, and in specific historical social contexts, liberating too. It opens up the possibility for the individual to break the external institutional oppressive structures to emerge as an autonomous individual. And, it also enables the individual to face the risks (find Ulrich Beck elaborating on 'risk society') of the contemporary living more confidently, negotiating life in a more healthy manner. All these facilities, in their own way, "generate programmes of actualisation and mastery"[19] of the self, i.e., an actualisation of the self in terms of gaining a mastery over the external structures that bind the self.

However, in the sociological orientation of the self, we are also faced with an acute sense of uncertainty, induced by the knowledge-economy, and confounded by a concurrent process of weakening of the ethical and metaphysical certainties. Knowledge-economy comes up with ever-new knowledge, and ever-new alternatives. The reflexive modernisation attendant on knowledge-economy presents the self with a chronic dilemma in the face of alternatives. As observed by Giddens, "the chronic entry of knowledge into the circumstances of action it analyses or describes creates a set of uncertainties to add to the circular and fallible character of post-traditional claims to knowledge."[20] In this sense, "the reflexivity of modernity actually undermines the certainty of knowledge, even in the core domains of natural science."[21] This kind of uncertainty and the kind of doubt attached to it " is not only disturbing to philosophers but is existentially troubling for ordinary individuals."[22]

Giddens seems to think that such forms of uncertainties makes the 'ontological security'[23] porous, and creates an 'existential anxiety' for contemporary individuals. Elliot Anthony, on the other hand, opines

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19 Ibid., p. 5. 20 Ibid., p. 28. 21 Ibid., p. 21.

22 Ibid.

23 This is a concept put forth by Giddens, who speaks of it as the security cover or the kind of bracketing an individual develops over its formative period in relation to its caretaker.

that uncertainties of the reflexive kind, makes the individual more tolerant towards alternate possibilities of life. It creates a selfhood, "receptive to other selves, without the psychic need for certitude and order, and with remarkable tolerance for ambivalence and ambiguity."[24] True, it creates a selfhood, which is more receptive, but the uncertainty and anxiety induced by the present-day modernity seems to engulf even the mood of tolerance. As Daniel Bell opines, the present modernity "establishes new promises and new powers, new constraints and new questions - with the difference that these are now on a *scale* that had never been previously imagined in world history."[25] The post-industrial transformation sets up questions, but provides no "answers."[26]

Increasing Necessity, Decreasing Facility

Against this background of increasing promises, but dismaying solutions, I surmise that there develops an increasing necessity to believe, even as the facility to believe is decreasing. This fact is due primarily to the dissipation of those institutions that have been traditionally introducing, inculcating, inscribing and sustaining the different forms of beliefs. Family, religion (organised), associations, social groups, even a nation-state which has 'secular' beliefs attendant on it, are some such institutions. Individuals not merely acquire their belief-systems, but also the very 'ability' to believe from these institutions. These institutions, so to say, facilitate an individual to believe.

Today, under the impact of the late-modernity, these institutions are increasingly getting dissipated or weakened. Family, which is perhaps the most primordial of all institutions, is increasingly disintegrating under the impact of late modernity that promotes an accelerated form of individuation or individualization. (This statement may not be too appropriate to the Indian context, but here we are speaking about human situations that are immersed in the so-called late-modernity.) Families do survive or maintain their hold, but more as an institution constituted by the individual, rather than the family constituting the individual. Similar is the case with other institutions too. In such conditions, it is easy to empirically perceive that since those institutions that enabled the individual

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24 Anthony Elliot, *Concepts of the Self*, p. 149.

25 Daniel Bell, "The Coming of Post-Industrial Society," p. 434

26 Ibid.

to believe are 'disintegrating' (losing their force upon the individual as something given from without), the ability to believe is also waning. The fact of 'decreasing facility' can be ascertained also from the point of view of the dissipation of the power of the metaphysical thinking. In a postmodern condition, metanarratives, including those of faith and ideologies do not take root. Those already existing metaphysical systems too get recast or reformulated as appropriate to the contemporary age. This dissipation or reformulation is once again a factor that contributes to the decreasing of the ability to believe.

However, that is not the whole scenario. One also notices on the other side, the emergence of a situation that calls forth and engenders beliefs. Institutions, systems, narratives, etc have waned, but, alongside, the human agency as expressed in individual autonomy is increasing. The individual, so to say, is getting freed from the forces of the cognitive and physical systems, structures, etc. He/she experiences an open situation wherein the individual can really believe.[27] It could be addressed as the right 'condition to believing.' Against this emergent condition of believing, one also finds a necessity for humanity to believe. The uncertainties caused by the chronic revision of knowledge leaves humanity with an increasing urge to believe.

Constituting' Religion(s)

The twin orientations of the self, i.e., a possibility and an uncertainty, that is experienced in today's reflexive modernity, and, within a sociological framework, the decreasing facility and the increasing necessity to believe converges in the present-day *constitutions* of religions. 'Constitutions of religions' is being undertaken in different fashions or 'designs' in different parts of the globe, depending upon the kind of socio-cultural reality obtaining in that context.

The most popular kind of constitution of religion is one that is undertaken by the middle class migrant individual for her/his personal life and needs. Such an individual, 'enriched' by the reflexive capabilities, goes beyond religious boundaries to draw inspiration from different

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27 By the way, that is what is meant by belief, i.e. believing in a higher goal or the embodiment of ultimacy, in a situation of real freedom. Otherwise, what obtains in the name of belief is 'mental or cognitive affirmations of certain faith formulations'. Believing is a dynamic activity, which keeps searching and affirming. It is a dialectic between searching and affirming.

religious traditions for constructing her/his life. This we find in those who take to what is being called as New Age Religions. From a more secular categorisation, this kind of constitution of religion could be likened to 'shopping of religion' from the market of religions. A pertinent point in this regard is that put forth by Paul Heelas as:

"People no longer feel obliged to heed the boundaries of the religions of modernity. Instead, they are positively encouraged to exercise their 'autonomy' to draw on what has diffused through culture... they show a willingness to combine symbols from (previously) disparate codes or frameworks of meaning."[28]

Side by side with the constitution of religions by ordinary individuals, we also find today emergence of cultic individuals who constitute religions around them, and mediate it to others as well. Ravi Shanker in the Indian context is a typical example for such a cultic constitution of religion. He integrates in himself a harmonious and judicious intake of different religious traditions, and, based on the ability he has built on his individual capacity, he mediates this religion to others. Incidentally, the religiosity he constitutes combines certain traditions along with the modern vision of life, and at the same time, seeks to remedy the 'existential anxiety' by building up a certain 'ontological security' against the context of ruptures caused by the postmodern fragmentations of knowledge and life-opportunities. In the case of the present-day Pentecostal evangelisers, especially the tele-evangelisers, too, such a combination of factors can be identified. Even in a pre-modern life-habitat, one finds the emergence of such cultic individuals, who are being addressed as 'god-men' or 'god-women'.

In addition to these kinds of constitution of religions, some modern agencies like market-promoting States too constitute religions by way of responding to the present-day global scenario. A case in point is the insight put forth by Roland Robertson on the kind of religion constituted in Japan, as a specific manner of responding to the globalisation era. According to Robertson, religion in Japanese society, as a 'religious infrastructure', has contributed to shaping of the mode of participation in the global context. Its specific characteristic lies in the fact that, it allows the individual to make a choice, and yet remain within a broader Japanese religious framework. In his own words:

28 Paul Heelas, *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, p. 5.

> [T]he Japanese people are not merely free to partake of what seems to suit their religious 'fancy' according to their particular life circumstances, but there is a diffuse ethos which indicates that the individual *should* regard components of overall Japanese religion as catering to different needs...the critical point is that the very structure of Japanese religion as a whole *and* the syncretism of everyday individual life are both based upon and encourage the tendency to make an identity from various sources" ... "there is a basic solidity to the syncretic nature of Japanese religion...which is more central to the solidarity of Japanese society and its external relationship. The main feature of that infrastructure resides in the essential, but nonetheless disputed, polytheism of Japanese religion - having its deepest roots in ancient beliefs in a multitude of *kami* - which, in turn, has facilitated a highly instrumental, functional concept of religion.[29]

Thus, the habitat of reflexive modernisation, sustained by knowledge-economy, provides a congenial climate for the constitution of religions. Religion, depending on the specific condition of life, manifests its creative energies.

Conclusion

Religion in the different economic systems has had different roles, on the basis of which it has also acquired its specific characteristics. In the feudal economic system, it has played the role of legitimising and maintaining 'dominance', on the one hand, and it has been as well a source for resisting and contesting the 'dominance' on the other. In the industrial capitalist system, it has played an instrumental role in furthering the projects of modernist agencies, such as the state. And, in the late-capitalist era, religion becomes a resource for reflexivity and contributes to newer construction of individual selves. Such a constitution of religion is undertaken within the habitat provided by knowledge-economy, and enabled by the reflexive modernisation that is set in motion by the very same knowledge-economy.

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29 Roland Robertson, *Global Culture*, SAGE, 1992, p. 95.

Religion and Theology in Information Society

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Dr. Felix is the head of the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras. In this essay he portrays some of the characteristics of the culture that is being created through computer-mediated communication. Since the mode of communication in history has meant also transformation in the belief and practices of religion, he inquires into the transformation that is effected by the new communication technology, and the challenges they pose to established religion, their beliefs and practices. In the second part of the article the author goes into the critical role Christian theology could perform in the developing information society, specially by challenging the control of knowledge and commodification of information. He highlights also the social accountability of knowledge-experts in every field.

Recently, during a brief visit to the United States for a board-meeting, I asked one of the immigrant Indians whether and to what extent the image of India has changed in that country. His response was picturesque: "Not long ago", he said, "in American homes, mothers used to tell children at mealtimes, 'don't waste food; in India children are starving'. Today the parents are telling their teenagers, "study hard; otherwise Indians will come and take away your jobs!'" No doubt at the root of this dramatic change of perception of India is the computer-mediated information technology.

No one may deny the fact that the advent of a new technology shapes the society in ways that are not predictable, and brings about transformations in the manner people live, effecting in the process a *transformation of consciousness*. Information technology is not simply a matter of communication and economy. It transforms society and culture and impacts upon our mode of life. History attests to the fact that every time there was a shift in the means of communication, there

took place profound changes in the society, and more importantly in the way people perceive themselves and the society.[1] The most obvious example is the change from oral mode of communication to the culture of the text or written word, and from this to the culture of print.

In the past, social theorists have employed different analytical keys to interpret the society and its dynamics. Karl Marx used political economy and Max Weber employed instrumental rationality as explanatory frameworks. Neither of them, however, took into account the *change of communication* in a society as contributing decisively to shape and mould it in ways other factors were not able to explain.

I

Technology and Emerging New Religious Situation

The question about religion in the information age needs to be placed against the backdrop of the profound *cultural and social transformation* that has been effected by digital technology and computer-mediated communication.[2] As historians tell us, every time a new mode of communication came into existence, the shape of religion and the mode of practicing it changed. The change from the oral to the textual, and from the textual to print brought about significant changes in religion, giving rise to new attitudes and practices. Today, we observe the emerging of new cultural patterns and social practices as a result of the communication revolution. Our question is: what kind of changes the new mode of communication is bringing about in the field of religion and its practice?[3] Obviously, with the advent of a new communication situation, the traditional beliefs and practices stand challenged. There is, for example, a crisis today in the understanding of and approach to

1 Cf. Carolyn Marvin, "When Old Technologies Were New: Implementing the Future", in Hugh Mackay and Tim O'Sullivan (eds), *The Media Reader: Continuity and Transformation,* Sage Publications, London, 2000, pp. 58-72.

2 For an overview of theories relating to cultural transformations resulting from new technologies, see Douglas M. Kellner and Meenakshi Gigi Durham (eds), *Media and Cultural Studies, Keywords,* Blackwell Publishers, Malden – Oxford, 2001, pp. 1 – 29. See also Mark Poster, "Postmodern Virtualities" ibid. pp. 611-624. James Curran et al., *Culture, Society and the Media,* Routledge, London- New York, 1995. Introduction pp. 11-29.

3 This is different from the question of how various religions are making use of the digital technology. This point is simple enough, and I am not going to delve on it. Religious traditions find in the digital technology a very effective means

symbol, authority, community, etc. which are all bound to affect the practice of religion in the age of digital communication.

Besides, this situation seems to give rise also to the emergence of a computer-mediated religion, known as *cyber-religion* or virtual religion. This has been made possible because, communication technologies have led to a *blurring of the real and the imaginary*. To adopt a classical idealist adage for today, "the imaginary is real". Traditionally, religions have abounded in symbols and these have been amply made use of in religious communication. But then one knew when one was in the symbolic realm, as in the case of rituals, and when out of it. With the progressive elimination of the distinction between the real and the imaginary, people today inhabit and interact with the virtual world created by the various forms of computer-mediated communication, and for many, this imaginary world has become the real one.

Closely connected with this collapse of the real and imaginary is the transformation that is occurring in the perception of *spatiality*. There is, of course, the simultaneity of space in our experiences made possible through the means of digital technology, whereby we could participate instantaneously in events at the other end of the world. What is meant here is something more: Whereas real space is something *given*, the virtual space is something *created*. This being the case, the question whether the virtual or imaginary space represents reality is not the real point. The very question of representation is becoming meaningless.

In the following pages we shall go a little more in depth into these two aspects of the question, namely (1) How and why changes are taking place in the approach to traditional religions, and (2) what sense does it make to speak of a virtual religion or cyber- religion.[4]

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to propagate their religious beliefs world-wide by opening up websites and networks. This is true of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity and other religious traditions. These traditional religions are joined by new religious groups and sects who try to bring their faith to others taking advantage of the digital technology. Thousands of pages of materials could be found in the world wide web. Among some Christian groups and religious sects the digital technology has been made ample use for the work of evangelicalism. Whereas several religious groups are disdainful of modernity since it has contributed, according to them, to the undermining of the religious universe, when it comes to digital technology they accommodate themselves perfectly to it.

4 These questions represent the new situation created by the computer-medi-

After going into these questions, in the second part of the article we shall consider the challenges the new situation presents to theology. The role of theology in the information age will be analyzed not only in terms of what the new mode of communication has brought about to religion, but also in terms of the changes and transformations created in the social and cultural domains.

From Interpretation of Symbols to Play of Symbols

Religion is a realm that is dense with symbolism. The lack of any one single precise meaning lets the symbol be multivalent. Traditional religions, by and large, do not have any difficulty regarding the evocative character of symbols and their polysemic trajectory. What we are concerned with here is a new dimension and approach to symbols characterizing computer-mediated religiosity. What is at stake is the way *signifier* and *signified* are related. In the new approach, symbols have no point of reference outside them, like in any game. Here the signifiers become self-referential and religious experience becomes a play of signifiers without any reference to outside reality; rather the signifiers themselves becomes the reality. Speaking of this characteristic of information society, Frank Webster notes,

Finally, though culture is quintessentially about meanings, about how and why people live as they do, it is striking that with the celebration of nonreferential character of symbols...we have congruence with communications theory and the economic approach to information. Here too we have a fascination with the profusion of information, an expansion so prodigious that it has lost its hold semantically. Symbols are now everywhere and generated all of the time, so much so that their meanings have imploded, hence ceasing to signify. [5]

Religious symbolism through the digital media dovetails with the emerging general culture in other spheres created and sustained by the same media. The culture that is created by the digital media tends in the direction of what Baudrillard has called "*simulacra*". Commenting upon the new type of religious experience Dawson notes,

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ated communication which has thrown up new sets of issues and problems not covered under the general consideration of religion and media. For the various aspects of this latter question, see Chris Arthur (ed.), *Religion and the Media. An Introductory Reader*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1993.

5 Cf. Hugh Mackay and Tim O'Sullivan (eds), *Op.cit.* p. 161.

For them [those practicing religiosity through cyberspace] the sacred need not be a real other, not even in the reduced sense of the power of sociality itself. They are content to work with a simulacrum. In true postmodernist manner the 'appearance' can stand in for the reality if it generates the desired experience ...The experience itself though ill-defined, has been sacralized.[6]

All this leads us to our next point which is about an important transformation that challenges the traditional religious conceptions and practices.

From Calculation to Simulation

Analysts characterize the modern world as a world of machines and calculations. In fact, computer itself was viewed as a large machine meant for *computation*, as its very name tells, and for storing data. Correspondingly, modernity is described as a period of calculative rationality. Computer and communication through digital technology exemplify the mechanical and calculative paradigm of modernity.

But the new thing about computer-mediated communication is that, while it still continues with its calculative functions, it has led us to a type of experience in which we enter into many virtual worlds, societies, persons, etc. There is increasingly a blurring of the boundaries between reality and appearance, similar to the one between the real and the imaginary. People do not seem to question the real man or woman behind the acting. For, acting is the *real thing*. The identification with the flow of images on the screen congeals into a real world in which one begins to inhabit. The reification of appearance into reality happens constantly through the computer-mediated communications. It is the world of simulation. In other words, the cultural situation created by digital technology is such that people deal with *facsimile* and the original is not a matter of any serious consideration or interest. The facsimile becomes the real, obscuring the very idea of the real or the original.

Paradoxically, everyday life becomes an extension of the screen, and not the other way round. No wonder then that people are attaching today more and more importance to how they appear. Since appearing

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6 Lorne Dawson, "The Mediation of Religious Experience in Cyberspace", in Morten T. Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg (eds), *Religion and Cyberspace*, Routledge, London, 2005, p. 29.

is important – because it is the reality - there is understandably, growing interest in the care for human body in its aesthetic dimension, in dress, fashion, etc. It is interesting to note that with the growing computer-mediated communications, garment-designs and fashion-shows are on the increase in China and India, two fast growing economies in the world.

A Radical Approach to Self and Identity

All major religious traditions have concerned themselves with the question of the human self and its relation to God, or the ultimate reality. The self which was defined in relation to the Ultimate underwent a horizontalization and self-affirmation, ever since the autonomous ego was proclaimed in the Western Enlightenment. The Enlightenment questioned the definition of the self with reference to God, and made *freedom* the point of reference for the constitution of the ego. This trend, though challenged the religiously inspired explanation of the self, however, did not prove incompatible with religious concerns. For human autonomy and freedom do not go against authentic understanding of religion.

Today, the fluidity in the understanding of the self as a result of computer-mediated communications is something very radical. We are in the face of not a single unitary self, which for many is becoming more and more an illusion. Computer-mediated communication, especially the internet, offers the possibility of bringing out many layers of the self, and indeed many "selfs" of the same person. This is because the virtual reality, world and society which digital communication creates is such that a person may assume many selfs and enter into communication with a wide variety of virtual contexts, situations and persons.[7] The point to note is that this is not something like acting out many roles which the performing arts make it possible. Here a person does not return to her real self after taking on other roles. Rather each of those selfs are real which means that a person exists with multiple selfs. The answer to the question "Who am I" is found in the aggregation of the many avatars computer-mediated communication makes possible for the self.

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7 Cf. Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen. Identities in the Age of Internet*, Phoenix, London, 1995.

What happens with many windows in the computer-mediated communication can be viewed as a symbol of what multiple selfs mean. A person assumes new flexible selfs as she shifts from one window of life to the other. Interestingly, in this there is a certain convergence between the postmodern thought on self as de-centred, and dispersed, and the multiple selfs in the computer-mediated communication. The problem of multiple selfs in the experience of computer-mediated communication leads us to the thoughts of Foucault, Deleuze, Lacan and Guattari, and one cannot but note close resemblance between their theories and the computer related practices.

To be able to understand better the emergence of a multiple self in relation to computer-mediated communication, we could contrast it with the constitution of the self in the print culture. In the print culture, there is the reader and the text. The reader is an autonomously constituted subject with her fixed identity, and she stands in relation to the text as the subject in relation to an objectively given reality. On the other hand computer-mediated communication is creating a multiple self. The social, political and cultural consequence of a multiple self need to be still worked out.

We need to take note of yet another emerging aspect of the identity of the self through computer-mediated communication. Whereas in the modern culture under the influence of the Enlightenment, the affirmation of the autonomous subject meant by implication also the constitution of a well-defined *private sphere* zealously guarded from the public gaze. The new communication situation has brought about a significant transformation also in this respect. On the surface it may appear that the individuals each one operating through computer-mediated communication is an impregnable individual. On the other hand, the modern networking and communication is such that people cannot conceal their identities. The system of registering and recording of personal data is giving an electronic identity to every person that can be retrieved at the click of the mouse at any time in any part of the world. The erosion of private identity and the control the networking exerts, remind us about the *panopticon* of Jeremy Bentham.

What is important for us here is to note that the kind of social and cultural situation the present mode of communication presents has deeper consequences for religion, its belief system and practices. If such is the

case of the self in computer-mediated communication, it follows that the traditional Christian understanding of sin, guilt and redemption stand challenged. To recall the extent of the religious implication of the new approach to the self, we need to ask: Who is the self that is supposed to sin and feel guilty? Who is the self spoken about in relation to redemption? Who is the self that bears personal responsibility for commissions and omissions? These are very uneasy questions to the traditional religious conception of self and identity.

Critique of Traditional Religious Symbols and Authority

The present cultural shift to simulation and a new perception of self and identity, have their consequences. The progressive use of digital technology creates a mutation of interest in religion from some of its traditional concerns to new areas. For example, the new mode of communication challenges the exaggerated importance accorded to *orthodoxy*. In a text-based culture, religions, in varying degrees, will concentrate on reproducing exactly their doctrines and belief systems. The preoccupation that the original should not be misrepresented was so great in certain religious traditions that they forbade any iconic representation of divinity. The fear was that the copy could eventually replace the original – a situation which we are experiencing precisely with the culture of the computer-mediated communication. Given this background of traditional religions, it is understandable that this new mode of communication is bound to cause a crisis in religions and in their practices.

As a result of this new mode of communication, the form of authority religions maintained in oral, textual and print communications too stand challenged.[8] People enter into communication with each other on serious religious matters without being inhibited by the religious authorities as in the case of the traditional mode of religious beliefs and practices. In these earlier forms of communication, religious agents and authorities still retained an aura of sacredness and authority. They were viewed as mediators in the transmission of religious knowledge, and not seldom, as the representatives of the divinity itself.

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8 See Eileen Barker, "Crossing the Boundary: New Challenges to Religious Authority and Control as a Consequence of Access to Internet" in Morten T. Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg (eds), *Op.cit.* pp. 67 – 85.

Symptomatic of the leveling effect of modern communication can be seen in the erosion of "secrecy" which played in the past an important role in enhancing the authority of religious agents. For example, today pontifical secrets are to be found in internet for anyone's access! Secrets and mantras communicated solely to selected disciples by gurus can be availed of by anyone through these media. With this I mean to say that the traditional institution of religion and its structures are challenged to rethink the mode of authority and other symbols that were part of a different mode of communication. [9] All this need not surprise us when we know that similar things happen also in other fields. To cite an example, in the past, in the medical field the prescription of experts went unquestioned. Today the doctors and medical experts have to take into account the influence the patient undergoes through television and internet which mould patient's self-diagnosis, which, in its turn, , will affect the way they take the expertise and authority of doctors.[10]

Alternative Social and Religious Space

Like the construction of self-identity, which has serious implications for religious conceptions and practice, there is also a construction of community through digital communication. I mean to say that computer-mediated communication has opened up the possibility of virtual religious communities through internet and through other such digital media. According to a broad definition, the kind of communities that can be created through internet and digital communication are "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough with sufficient human feeling to form

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9. Secrecy as a means of control for the authorities went along with a general culture and social mores of the past which attached much importance to it. This stands in contrast to our age which is "fascinated by exposure. Indeed the *acts* of exposure itself now seems to excite us more than the content of the secrets exposed" Joshua Meyrowitz, "No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behaviour", in Hugh Mackay and Tim O'Sullivan (eds), *Op.cit. p.* 103. One more factor that creates this situation is the collapse of the traditional demarcation of the private and the public. The merging of the two has its consequences also in the religious domain

10 Cf. Peter Horsefield, "Teaching Theology in a new Cultural Environment", in Chris Arthur (ed.), *Religion and the Media. An Introduction on Reader*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1993, p. 45.

webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" .[11] When the creation of such communities are centered on religion and religious experience, we could speak of virtual religious communities. This needs to be distinguished from religious groups who make themselves available on cyberspace materials and informations about themselves, and which are then shared by its members through internet and other computer-mediated means. Hence there is a difference between "religion on cyber space" and "cyber-religion." [12]. Consequently the nature of communities in these two modes are also different.

There are, however, many who would be skeptical about the seriousness of such virtual religious communities and ask to what extent they could be real. We will assess the significance of virtual religious community if we look at it not as a substitute for real community, but as an *alternative* space for social and religious communication. As an alternative it appears to overcome certain limitations of traditional religious communities and present at the same time challenges to these forms of community identities. If meditations and prayers could be done online, there should be no serious difficulty of forming via internet a group of people who share similar religious concerns and meet regularly on net and form a virtual religious community.[13] Many participants in these virtual religious communities seem to derive benefit out of it, as for example, in overcoming their loneliness and isolation by creating a sense of solidarity and even "affectivity" with others with whom they communicate on line. But it would be a tall claim that the practice of religious communities congregating together in places of worship for rituals, festivals and celebrations could be substituted by computer-mediated communication.

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11 Cf. H. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Reading, Massachusetts, 1993, p. 5.* See ID., "The Virtual Community: Finding Connection in a Computerized World:, in Hugh Mackay and Tim O'Sullivan (eds), *Op.cit.* pp. 273-285; see also David Morley and Kevin Robins , "Reimagined Communities? New Media, New Possibilities" *ibid.* pp. 336-351.

12 Mortern Hojsgarrd, "Cyber-religion. On the Cutting Edge between the Virtual and the Real", in T. Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg (eds), *Op.ci.* p. 50.

13 Mun-Cho Kim reports about the existence of Buddhist religious communities on line. Cf. Mun-Cho Kin. "Online Buddhist Community: An Alternative Religious Organization in the Information Age", in Morten T. Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg (eds), *Op.cit.* pp. 138 – 148.

What we have said leads us to the broader issue of cyber-religion and its possibilities.

The Case of Cyber-religion

Today one may order online Tirupathi *laddu* and participate in the religious rituals of Vailankanni Church through computer-mediated communication. Indians away from their country and home-towns may welcome for example participation online in a *puja* in one of their preferred temples, and receive also a virtual *prasada*, or undertake a virtual pilgrimage to Kasi or to Sabarimala. In this case the digital communication helps to make present the reality that is physically absent and enables association with it. . But that does not yet make a cyber-religion. What we are probing here is cyber-religion that exists but on line creating in the process a virtual community. What cyber-religion means could be understood best by contrasting it with the use made by established religion to reach out through internet and other means:

Religion *on* cyberspace...thus refers to the information uploaded by *any* religion, church, individual or organization which also exists and can be reached in the off-line world...Contrarily 'religion *in* cyberspace' refers to religion which is created and exists exclusively in cyberspace, where it enjoys a considerable degree of "virtual reality". In the first case, the primary function of the Internet is to mediate information on religious contents and activities that has already been established or defined by various religious traditions outside cyberspace. In the second case, the Internet rather functions as a creative or formative environment fostering new religious contents and activities online.[14]

If in the past, as we saw, the mode of communication transformed the nature of religious practices, we ask what is strange if we have a new mode of religion corresponding to the new digital technological means. This would be the virtual or cyber-religion[15] The religious experience here is not, so to say, a fast-food version of established

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14 Morten n T. Hojsgaard, *art. cit. pp.* 50 – 51. , For his definition and distinction, the author refers to the work of Karaflogk.

15 It may be interesting to recall in this connection that in the Christian tradition, the physical absence of a person in ritual was not considered as hindering him or her from another mode of participation in it. This is the case, for example, with "communion of desire" where, even though, the person is not physically present nevertheless is virtually made participant in the eucharistic celebration.

religion, packaged for quick and easy consumption. We are in the face of an altogether *new genre of religiosity* wherein people meet and celebrate their religions through the various means of digital technology.[16]

The new genre of virtual religion has different presuppositions about the individual and society and needs to be studied *on its own*, and should not be mixed up with other forms of connecting religion and digital technology. In its creation, this particular form of religiosity is a matter of *bricolage* , assembling parts and pieces from a variety of sources. It is a kind of virtual syncretism that may not be compared with the kind of syncretism spoken of in traditional religions. Finally, this religiosity of the internet may have other religious aspirations than the traditional ones, as well as a different understanding of the sacred. This is an area which requires more of empirical study and research. One of the things this type of religiosity has done is to challenge the theory of secularization.[17]

Some Difficulties

It may be further argued that virtual religiosity through computer-mediated communication can be very distracting and may not be conducive to reflection, and much less to meditation and contemplation. By highlighting the visual sense, as is the case with computer meditation, the virtual religiosity could be even an obstacle to deeper spirituality. As one author put it,

Net is not very compatible with the demands for solitary contemplation and social disengagement that most religious traditions prescribe for true spiritual development. Rather the Internet tends to involve its users in an endless and distracting series of addictive facsimiles of life experiences.[18]

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16 The cyber religious experience has gone through three different "waves:" ever since the studies on the relationship of Internet and religion started in the 1990's. See Morten n T. Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg (eds), *op.cit.* . Introduction, pp. 1-11. See also other relevant articles in the volume, specially Lornel L. Dawson, "The Mediation of Religious Experience in Cyberspace", pp. 15-37; Stephen D. O'Leary, "Utopian and Dystopian Possibilities of Networked Religion in the New Millennium" pp. 38 - 49; Morten T. Hojsgaard, "Cyber-religion: On the Cutting Edge between the Virtual and the Real" pp. 50– 63.

17 Cf. Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, "Reality Sucks: On Alienation and Cybergnosis", in *Concilium* 2005/1, p. 87.

18 Lorne L. Dawson, *art.cit.* p. 18.

If that is the case, such an objection could be raised against elaborate religious rituals and narratives in traditional religious practices, since these attracting the visual and auditory senses could prove to be distraction from deeper spiritual practices.

Yet another difficulty could be that the virtual religion freed from space, and from actual community, may not respond to the collective and communitarian character that is required of religion. But those who practice virtual religion attest to the fact that they are able to enter into communion and fellowship with other members and feel as part and parcel of a community, [19] which, though not visible, nevertheless becomes true and effective for them. [20]

Going by the above reasoning, it would appear that virtual religion is not only a legitimate form of religious means, but could be even more effective. This is because unlike in the traditional expression of religiosity in which, generally, people are passive while the religious agent performs rituals, in the virtual religion there is ample scope to be active and interactive with others. Moreover, some of the objections made against the practice of virtual community and religiosity, derive from the criteria used to judge the traditional forms and expressions of religion. The new virtual religious reality needs to be judged on its own, and not in relation to the canons of traditional religiosity.

The traditional forms of religiosity and cyber-religion may not be opposed to each other. Cyber-religion need not replace the traditional religion; it may be more suitable for some than others. History tells us that the expressions of religion through the oral medium was not supplanted by the textual and later on by the print media. Even when the textual tradition came into existence, the oral continued, which makes us speak of "oral aspects of scripture in the history of religion."[21]

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19 Cf. Nathan D. Mitchell, "Ritual and New Media", in *Concilium 2005/1*, pp. 90- 98.

20 That having been acknowledged, we need to also pay attention to the danger of isolation from the larger society. There is the danger of net-mediated virtual religious communities turning into sects and ghettos, fostering esoteric beliefs and arcane cults bordering on fanaticism with disastrous consequences.

21 William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word. Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*, Cambridge University, Cambridge, 1987.

To conclude our discussion on cyber-religion, first of all, it would be quite unrealistic and utopian to claim that cyber-religion is going to be the religion of the future. No such claim is made here. The type of cyber-religion described above with followers who make enthusiastic experience do exist today, and will continue to exist. But that need not characterize the general situation of religion in the future. However, the experience of cyber-religion and more basically the computer-mediated communication has brought to the fore certain issues and question which critically thinking religious traditions need to address as these undermine and question old certainties and practices.

Secondly, one of the questions about the computer-mediated religion is whether and to what extent it is able to relate to the *sacred*, one of the fundamental dimensions in the experience of religion. Unless we want to reduce religiosity to a reality of human solidarity and find sacredness in it (Durkheim), we need to ask the question about a transcendental dimension of religion that is interpreted by people not only as something that happens in inter-human realities of relationships and solidarity but also is experienced as something given - gift. This argument is not meant to deny sacredness to the religious experience through internet and other media. That may well be possible, even if the sacred through the digital medium will have other features distinguishing it from the traditional characterization of the sacred. We need to respect the experience of people who claim that through cyber-religion they have gained spiritual benefit and have experienced encounter with the sacred.

II

New Theological Questions and Tasks

The above analyses and reflections have thrown up a lot of challenges to theology. Besides, like religion, theological understanding itself needs to undergo profound changes. In the following pages, we shall consider the task of theology in the computer-mediated society from two basic angles. In the first place, certain tasks for theology derive from the need to accommodate to the culture of modernity. Secondly, the computer-mediated communication takes us beyond the culture of modernity to a new way of life and experience, to which theology needs to respond creatively.

A retrospective look will attest that Christianity found itself in a situation of struggle every time a different culture appeared as the result

of a new mode of communication. This can be most clearly discerned from the early Christianity, especially in its difference in the mode of communication from Judaism and from the classical culture.[22] Heir to the Jewish culture, Christianity found it extremely difficult, for example, to accommodate to the culture of the Greco-Roman world characterized by its strong visual expressions as could be seen in the classical statues, public altars or in manifold pieces of the Roman imperial architecture. The temptation was to turn Christianity into an *aniconic religion* and in the process condemn the visual world of the classics. The history of this struggle brought out new insights into symbols and icons. .

The Crisis of the Dogmatic Mode of

Religious Communication

Communication through digital technology calls for a radical rethinking about the ways in which Christian faith has been communicated in the past. To take the digital technology merely as instruments and vehicles for more effective communication of Christian truths, is to remain at the surface level. In fact exaggerated attention to this way of looking at the relation of faith and communication could obscure the deeper issues involved and evade the real challenges posed by the digital communication.

The predominant model of communication we find in mainline Christianity is that of the written text, by which is meant not Scriptures alone. The transmission of faith and its communication on the whole has been too strongly text and formula-bound. The rigidly fixed formulas anchored in dogmatic spirit found concrete expression in the production of catechisms. This mode of communication of religious truths by its very nature makes people passive recipients rather than active agents. What an important vehicle of faith-communication the catechisms can be inferred from numerous catechisms that appeared and the impressive number of copies printed. For example copies of Luther's *Kleiner Katechismus (*small catechism) of 1529 saw the printing of 100, 000 copies, something quite astounding in that age when printing was quite in its infancy and literacy was substantially low compared to our age.

22 Cf. Thomas E. Broomershine, "Christian Community and Technologies of the Word", in James McDonnell and Francis Trampiets (eds), *Communicating Faith in a Technological Age*,. St Paul Publication, Middlegreen,, Slough, 1989, pp. 56-77.

Even more striking is the fact that the catechism by Peter Canisius, written in 1554 saw 233 editions by the time of his death in 1597.[23] Catechisms ensured uniformity assisted by the new communication mode of print that helped reproduce identical copies of the same. With such a practice of communication, it was easy to create conceptual stereotypes and standardization in the transmission of faith. The existence of identical copies created also the possibility of a rigorous control over deviations from the text. Contrary to the mode of communication implied in the transmission of dogmatic texts and catechisms, the new mode of computer-mediated communication is interactive and involves the subject in the appropriation of faith.

The dogmatic mode of religious communication is based on the dated and rather simplistic theory of sender, message and recipients. Obviously the sender becomes also a centre of religious power. But today, the digital communication challenges such forms of religious communication by highlighting a semantic model in which there is interaction and a certain construction in the process of communication, which goes beyond the role of simply decoding and translating the message. This is true of all communication, including religious communication. All this needs to be taken into account by a theology that is sensitive to the developing situation.

Theological education today, is confined to the models of communication centered on orality, text or print. There is even an assumption that the study of religion connected with texts and documents are superior, and the computer-mediated communication is viewed as marginal, and at the most as means to convey the truths laid down in texts and documents. There is the colossal failure to see that a different mode of communication creates a different shape of society with its own modes thought, behaviour and culture. For theology to fulfill its vocation and tasks today, it needs to critically rethink its methods and approaches in the light of the information society being created by the digital technology. For many in the Church, cultural issues have come to be identified with the issue of "inculturation" which is a relatively small field and which has societies of the oral, textual and print culture as points of reference, and not the information society created through digital technology.

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23 Pierre Babin, *The New Era in Religious Communication*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1991, p. 26.

The Challenge of Computer-mediated Culture

Theology would not be playing a helpful role if its critique is unenlightened about the nature and dynamics of computer-mediated communication and it's functioning. A moralizing strategy will not enable us to face the new cultural situation. Hence we cannot but sufficiently underline the importance of present-day *cultural studies* for theology. The culture that computer-mediated communication creates needs to be understood on its own terms and cannot be made object of condemnation from a moral standpoint completely divorced from the present experiences. What Dogulas Kellner and others characterize as "counterpedagogy" could become a concrete programme for theology today which can help inculcate "critical thinking and the art of interpretation". Theological hermeneutics today is not only the engagement with sacred texts and faith-formulas; it needs to expand to include the reading and interpretation of cultural texts, and indeed critically.

[F]resh critical strategies are needed to read cultural texts, to interpret the conjunctions of sight and sound, words and images that are producing seductive cultural spaces, form and experiences. This undertaking also involves exploration of the emergent cyberspaces and modes of identities, interaction, and production that is taking place in the rapidly exploding computer culture ...[24]

A Critical Task

For Christian faith, recognition of digital technology and computer-mediated communication is to acknowledge two important truths: God's creation and human capacity to transform nature. However, there are many areas of the present-day information society which faith and theology need to critically examine.

There is a prophetic task ahead for a theology sensitive to the culture and society that emerges as a result of information technology and communication. Part of this prophetic task is to raise questions about the power and control the system of computer-mediated communication today represents. First of all, things are so vague and amorphous that

24 Douglas Kellner et al. "Adventures in Media and Cultural Studies. Introducing Keywords" in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner ()eds), *Media and Cultural Studies. Keywords,* Blackwell Publishers, Malden- Oxford, 2001, p. 29.

one may tend to forget that the system behind the new digital technologies is a strongly centralized and controlled one, despite the appearance to the contrary. If hegemony is defined as the rule through forced consent of the subjugated, much of it is true about the situation of power operative in the networking and in centralization of communication . A theology that is concerned about the human condition, cannot but raise the question whether the computer-mediated communication is truly a liberating activity.

Critique of Knowledge-Control in the Informational Capitalism

Since every technology and every new form of communication has a particular social context, theology needs to interrogate regarding the *social implications* of the information technology. This is something that tends to be overlooked.

In all societies there has been a certain form of *control* of knowledge which gave power to certain groups of people. Among many civilizations, the control of knowledge by the priestly class helped to maintain their hold over the society. In medieval Europe the importance of monastic institutions derived from the fact that the monks were gate-keepers of knowledge. At a time when there was no print media, the monks spent day and night in copying texts and preserving them, sometimes even chain them – because they were so precious. The extent of present day control of knowledge, strangely in an information society, has no parallel.

Secondly, producing enormous quantity of information as millions of pages available on the internet, does not guarantee that conditions are created for people to be *critical* and *creative*. In fact, the opposite seems to be happening. Social and critical consciousness is drowned in the plethora of informations. Moreover, the information society does not seem to facilitate greater participation of people in public affairs, as it should. In fact, the availability of information could create conditions for greater involvement in public affairs and to formulate policies that benefit the people. There is a deeper reason for inhibiting social consciousness and engagement, and that leads us to the next point.

There is so an overwhelming attention to the engineering and quantitative aspect of communication, that one easily forgets information has to do with *quality*. This is another area of critical theological reflection we need to undertake. A genuine theology will concern about the

enhancement of the quality of human life today. Such a goal, evidently, cannot be achieved by simply increasing the volume of information. Precisely because information is not viewed in its social implications, it becomes amorphous quantitative bytes moving in decontextualized and dehistoricized vacuum, loosing in meaning and quality. Creation of public libraries in the past had the goal of providing the means for the public to inform themselves. To what extent has the present information society has social goals and ideals? Similar critical questions need to be raised about the origin, purpose and consequence of information.

Commodity in the Informational Capitalism

Information is today turned into a marketable *commodity,* so much so we could speak of an "*informational capitalism*", which through connectivity and strategic alliances turn information into a profitable capital for investment and trade. Its functions in many respects are similar to industrial capitalism. Informations are not produced and circulated in a neutral atmosphere. Thanks to the flow of information, there has come into existence an "intellectual and social organization of the sciences".[25] The domination inscribed into the networking gets reproduced also in the circulation of information, favouring the powerful. As in the colonial times rail-links were built up for better exploitation of resources, the connectivity and networking serve for economic exploitation. Drawing a parallel to today's situation, Ien Ang comments critically on "global village".

In this respect, McLuhan's 'global village', a world turned into a single community through the annihilation of space in time, represents nothing other than (the fantasy) of the universal culmination of capitalist modernity.[26]

Everything is done for a price. This strong economic and market angle to information explains why despite being in an information society, people are deprived of the vital information that is necessary for their life. Like other commodities, information is produced, stored and exchanged. Money and market are involved in each of these processes.

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25 Richard Whitley, *The Intellectual and Social Organization of the Sciences,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000 (2nd edition).

26 Ien Ang in Hugh Mackay and Tim O'Sullivan (eds), *The Media Reader: Continuity and Transformation,* Sage Publications, London, 2000, p. . 36.

Institutions and structures are created that will serve this economic end, and what is more, the existing institutions are transformed and steered to this goal. The most obvious case is the institutions of higher education – universities, research institutions and colleges which are all turned into factories of knowledge. This trend is observable everywhere – both in developed and developing countries. Clear evidence is the neglect of humanities and social sciences in the institutions of higher learning, and privileging of those science subjects which produce marketable knowledge and application-skills.

Recently while listening to a talk by a very highly placed official in charge of higher education in the country, I was appalled at the lack of any social thrust in the educational policies for the country he was trying to present in managerial jargons. The impression was inevitable that higher education is a system of efficient knowledge management – production, distribution and consumption. The strategies and funding are all oriented to this direction. The underlying assumption in such educational orientation is one that sees progress and development as enabling rational choices through furnishing of information, and it is in this sense educational institutions are viewed and interpreted.[27]

Transformative Knowledge and wisdom

Knowledge has other purposes. It is the failure to pay attention to these purposes that contributes to the amnesias of social realities. Knowledge has a transformative power and that is why education is connected with the formation of the person and the development of the total personality. Moreover, there has been a strong conviction in all religious traditions that knowledge has a sacred character like the nature itself. Even if it is acquired through human effort, there is a character of *givenness* in all knowledge in which human beings partake. This transcendent character of knowledge is also behind the respect traditionally given to *gurus* as source of knowledge and to veneration of knowledge in Hindu tradition, for example, through *Saraswatipuja* and the personification and veneration of knowledge as *Sophia* or wisdom in the Christian tradition. Possession of knowledge for enhancing ones' power and depriving others of it, is reprehensible. Hence the sacred

27 Cf. Philip Elliott, "Intellectuals, the 'Information Society' and the Disappearance of Public Sphere", in Oliver Boyd-Barrett and Chris Newbold (eds), *Approaches to Media. A Reader*, Arnold, New York, 1996, p.261.

character of knowledge needs to be related to the social and service aspect of this form of power. Concretizing this goal means turning communication from a vertical and centralized practice into a horizontal and participative process. Like in other areas of life participative communication will help overcome the risks and dangers involved in a dominating mode of communication. This form of communication will stir the critical sense in the people regarding the generation and channeling of knowledge.

We are here in a very different realm from the cult of information about which Theodore Roszak observes:

People who have no clear idea of what they mean by information or why they should want so much of it are nonetheless prepared to believe that we live in an information Age, which makes every computer around us what relics of the True Cross were in the age of Faith (Emblems of salvation.)[28]

Accountability of Knowledge-Experts

Experts and professionals of knowledge are accountable to the society. There seems to be greater consciousness about this especially among the poor. Recently, on the eve of the tsunami anniversary on December 26, people on the badly hit coastal villages of Tamilnadu were interviewed by a journalist who wanted to assess the mood of the people. There was widespread belief that tsunami will be there again exactly one year after on the same day of December 26. People were even booking rooms in lodges away from the shore in view of what they believed would be the repeat of tsunami! When the journalist pointed out that their view was not scientific, there came the retort: "But where was science when our dear ones were swallowed up by tsunami? Why did not science predict and inform us about tsunami?" These are disturbing questions coming from the simple suffering folk as a challenge to science and technology and directed to knowledge experts and professionals. They are questions that remind us about the social purpose of information and knowledge. It is this which is lacking because information and knowledge, as we noted earlier, have clear economic goals. The mask of legitimacy science and technology wear are ripped

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28 Theodore Roszak, *The Cult of Information. The Folklore of Computers and the True Art of Thinking*, Paladin, Grafton Book, London 1988, p. 10.

open by the public fury incensed by disappointment and suspicion that knowledge is stored and shared for making profits.

Popular demands for information that concern people's health and protection of environment are putting pressure on the isolation of knowledge from the people. Moreover there is a general skepticism on the expert-knowledge and communication transmitted to people regarding environmental and health issues, all the more so if the experts are associated with profit-making institutions like the multinationals..[29] Here I think a meaningful theology will find stimulus for a critique of the information society and an opportunity to strengthen the resolve of the people to challenge a knowledge system and communication that serve only for domination.

This whole unfolding scenario tells us that communication is not simply a matter of culture and society today; it has a crucial economic function, which allows us to speak legitimately about "informational economy". If power is conditioned by economy, it is information that qualifies to be a great power since it has become an indispensable ingredient in the structure and functioning of present-day economy.

Heightened Uncertainty

A critical question theology needs to ask is whether information age has contributed to lessening the uncertainty and ambivalence that have marked the life of humanity since the advent of modern science and technology.[30] Experience tells us that, with every advancement, and with growing accumulation of information, uncertainty gets heightened rather than reduced. As Baudrillard has pointed out,

What is constant is an immense uncertainty...The revolution of our time is the uncertainty revolution. We are not ready to accept this. Paradoxically, however, we attempt to escape from uncertainty by relying even more on information and communications systems, so merely aggravating the uncertainty itself.[31]

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29 Cf. William Leiss, "Risk Communication and Public Knowledge" in . David Crowley and David Michell (eds), *Communication Theory Today*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 19951, p.134.

30 Zygmunt Bauman, *Moderne und Ambivalenz*, Fischer, Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1996. See also, Ien Ang, "In the Realm of Uncertainty: The Global Village and Capitalist Postmodernity", in David Crowley and David Michell (eds), *op.cit.* pp. 193-213.

31 Jean Baudrillard, as quoted in inside cover page by Barry Smart, *Facing Mo-*

Increase in information and uncertainty are in tandem. The uncertainty is nurtured in our times by fragmentation and atomization of knowledge. Specialization and atmoisation of knowledge apparently serve to solve problems. But we also observe that they also are the sources of new problems, something which makes us seriously doubt whether uncertainty could be reduced through specialization. The flow of information instead of lessening the uncertainty has heightened it.

The contribution of theology is not through specialization. Rather in a world of fragmentation, it needs to instill more than ever a sense of the whole. This wholistic approach to life will bring about greater sense of security and peace to humanity. Now that the multiplying of information is not solution to the uncertainty that has gripped the world and our societies, theology will also pay attention to instill the qualitative dimension in our information society.

Theology for an Inclusive Information Society

Like in other fields, in the field of communication too there has taken place a scandalous divide between those who are digitally powerful and those who are left behind. Given the fact that communication technology is becoming increasingly a central element in the organization of the society, its governance, mobilization and control of resources, etc., it is highly important that the benefits of the communication serves wholistic developmental goals and objectives. Here is a field in which theology needs to involve, so that greater digital justice is ensured, and those at the rural areas and at the margins of the society have access to communication.

The struggle for liberation and justice needs to be fought today in the communication field given its crucial importance, and theology should assist in this process. At the global level greater consciousness for an inclusive information society has been created by the World Summit on Information Society held at Geneva in 2003, and more recently a follow-up summit in Tunis 2005.[32] The declaration of principle made in Geneva calling for a people-centered information society, and the reiteration of

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dernity: Ambivalence, Reflexivity and Modernity, Sage Publications, London 1999.

32 Cf. Raphael Capurro, "Does Digital Globalization Lead to a Global Information Ethic?", in *Concilium 2005/1* pp. 36-45.

the same in Tunis will serve as a stimulus for theology to engage itself both at the macro level and at the local level for the cause of justice. The call to commitment to justice today is a call to transform the field of communication in such a way that the poor and the marginalized have greater access to it, and that they and their concerns are included in creating policies and infrastructures relating to communication. Governments, private sector, NGOs, civil society – all these need to concur towards the goal of greater digital justice. Theology could become an important source of inspiration in this important common project.

Conclusion

With information society and computer-mediated communication, we are at bottom dealing with the question whether technology determines our lives, or whether it should serve life which is larger in its depth and scope than technological means.[33] In other words, should the technological facts and possibilities become automatically also the defining element of human and societal life. It is these larger questions which also offer us clues as how to go about with religion in this information age. Digital technology offers new possibilities, as in other fields, also in the exercise of religion which needs to be considered on its own and not to be judged by traditional forms of religiosity which themselves are expressions of particular modes of communication. There is then a set of questions which relate to how theology needs to adapt to the change of society caused by the new mode of communication. In its broader sense these questions would fall under faith and modernity, of which technology is a very crucial element.

For religion and theology the information society presents a challenging task, because this society is characterized by ambiguity

33 There is a technological euphoria which depicts the present age in its singular character effecting dramatic change in the society and in the general outlook. Here, I think, there is a certain exaggeration of matters. We will come to a more realistic assessment of the general condition created by computer-mediated technologies if we view the present state not as something totally new, but in continuity with the past. Let us take the case of the "information society" a characterization of the present-day world. The way the matter is portrayed is such that almost every occupation is viewed as belonging to knowledge industry. By these standards, even a mason and carpenter would be workers in knowledge industry, since they cannot do what they do without the "know-how"!

and contradictions. The nature of this situation is well-captured by Manuel Castells when he observes:

The implicit logic of the Network Society appears to end history, by enclosing it into the circulation of recurrent patterns of flow. Yet, as with any other social form, in fact it opens up a new realm of contradiction and conflict, as people around the world refuse to become shadows of global flows and project their dreams, and sometimes their nightmares, into the light of new history making.[34]

Theology is not meant to navigate on safe waters or to be anchored securely close to *terra firma*. It needs to assist the people and society in making sense of the contradictions and help transform the situation. The critical role of theology will consist in examining whether and to what extent information society is an equitable and just society. It will go into the domination, control and commodification of information, and interrogate whether information society brings knowledge closer to the people and acts for their well-being. Hence questions like access to information, availability of resources for the weaker sections in the society will form part of the critical agenda of theology.

On its part, theology itself will undergo a thorough transformation, since communication through digital technology and the values and cultural practices attend on it raise questions on certain crucial aspects of the traditional practices of faith and the institutions and structures and mode of thought connected with it. Taking up these new challenges and rethinking theology in the context of information society is important for it to play effectively its critical and transformative role in our times.

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34 Manuel Castells, in Hugh Mackay and Tim O'Sullivan (eds), *op.cit.* p. 410.

Gender and the Digital Divide

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Dr. Pushpa is lecturer in the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras. In this article she explores the interface between gender and the digital divide. The article starts with an analysis and a gender critique of the prevalent approaches to the digital divide. It then goes on to analyze the social component of technological practices and provides gender as a viable category of analyses that influences the construction and emergence of technology and its practices. Presenting gender as a category that needs to be included in the investigation of the digital divide the article explores two factors : the lack of visibility of women in the ICT sectors and the loss of identity and self brought about in the ITES sector. A gender approach to the problematic, the analysis claims, helps us to bridge the digital divide in favour of the vast alienated sections of society.

If there is any silver lining around the not-so-happy discussions on women and their access to gains from ICTs, it is in the fact that with respect to policy on ICTs, the story fortunately is almost identical to gender in relation to all other domains. All of us here who believe in women's equality can take heart in the fact that a new script for engendering policy and engaging in advocacy for women's rights thankfully need not be written.[1] *– Anita Gurumurthy, Gender and ICT Advocate.*

The world today is an information society. Information is increasingly used in all aspects of human activity, and many technologies assist in providing information in a timely manner. Yet while information has always been indispensable in processes of political, economic and social development, the manner in which that information is produced,

1. Anita Gurumurthy, quotation downloaded from website, http://www.itforchange.net/. She is a founder member of IT for Change, an NGO in India that seeks to influence the information society's debate through research and action.

accessed and controlled today is widely debated. For example, there is much discussion about the "digital divide," in which some members of society or areas of the world are left behind others who have ready access to advanced ICTs. [2] Those who prefer a positive perspective on ICTs for development talk of "digital opportunities". Such people who are inspired by optimistic hopes and fantasies believe that the digital age will bring transparency of government, universal access to information, democratization of the world's resources and prosperity for the world's citizens. However research done in the field of technology and its social influences present us with statistics to the contrary. This paper is guided by it and the interface between gender and technological practices. In view of that, for its theoretical framework, the paper draws on a body of research, (based on field work desire to explore whether and in what way modern ICTs can fulfill such promises for a large percent of the world's population who are women. In this line it seeks to investigate whether issues of gender affect the digital divide. In order to understand the empowering or disempowering potential of any technology it is important to analyze the gendering processes within the communities in which these technologies emerge and case studies) that explores and questions the specific cultural setting and world view that gives significance to available and prevailing practices of using and designing ICTs. Before we go into these issues let us make a study of the concept of digital divide, the multiple perspectives to it and critically investigate the various solutions proposed to the problematic and the theoretical frameworks that underlie it.

The Digital Divide[3]

Digital divide is the term used to describe the fact that the world can

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2. ICTs - Information and Communication Technologies comprise a complex and heterogeneous set of goods, applications and services used to produce, distribute, process and transform information. They include the outputs of industries as diverse as telecommunications, television and radio broadcasting, computer hardware and software, computer services and electronic media (e.g. the Internet, electronic mail, electronic commerce and computer games). - M. Gillian Marcelle, "Transforming Information & Communications Technologies for Gender Equality," in *Gender in Development Monograph Series* #9.New York: UNDP, 2000,8.

3. Definition of Digital Divide downloaded on 28.12.2005 from http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/0,,sid9_gci214062,00.html

be divided into people who do have the capability and access to modern information technology and people who do not have access to and the capability to use modern information technology, such as the telephone, television, or the Internet. The digital divide viewed analytically is not a unitary phenomenon. Electronic disparity exists between many groups of people, for example between those in cities and those in rural areas or between economic classes, or still between the educated and the uneducated and, globally, between the more and less industrially developed nations. We have ample statistics to substantiate these facts. A 1999 study, for example, showed that 86% of Internet delivery was to the 20 largest cities. In another study conducted in the year 2002, the researchers exemplified with illustrations and figures that less than five percent of the world's population has gained access to the much talked about information age. Even in economically developed countries like the US and Australia, surveys reveal massive differences between the rich and the poor, whites and non whites, and the educated and the uneducated.

Multiple Digital Divides

Many are inclined to believe that the digital divide can be explained purely by economic factors, to the exclusion of social, cultural, linguistic, gender or racial considerations. They would argue that disparities in the buying power of minorities and dominant groups or between low-income communities and middle-class communities, is at the root of the problem, and that providing access alone will ensure a level playing field. Nonetheless Studies conducted in different countries show that not only the gender gap in computer and Internet use is increasing over time, but also other disparities like the socioeconomic and racial gap for example are growing. While we can certainly expect a rise in the number of people of low income communities who buy computers, as equipment prices drop, the idea that cost is the only prohibitive measure is a gross oversimplification of the complex and multiple nature of the digital divide existing in many countries. For example according to the National Telecommunications Information, minorities like the Afro-American communities or the Latino communities lag behind Whites, even at the same level of income with respect to computer ownership.[4] This finding

4. Randal Pinkett, "Bridging the Digital Divide: Socio-Cultural Constructionism and an Asset-Based Approach to Community Technology and Community

helps us to refute the argument that economics is the only hurdle to the bridging of the digital divide.

India is a country where ICTs have made giant leaps, however as Cyber ethnographers say, the sub continent suffers from multiple digital divides. Trends in the digital divide have been analyzed. Levels of inequality in access to ICTs remain high still, around twice the average levels of income inequality. Development Scientists and Cyber theorists have also shown that trends in the digital divide show sharply contrasting indicators according to the type of technology. For example the distributions of Internet hosts and personal computers remain highly uneven. Mainline telephony, though, shows small, but steady reductions in inequality. Mobile telephony and Internet usage suggest that the digital divide measured by inequality in these distributions may be reducing. The analysis of the digital divide presented in a study undertaken by the UN provides evidence that marked disparities in ICT access and usage between countries continue to exist, and remain sizeable, although disparities in Internet and mobile usage are reducing.[5] The much-debated incidence of the digital divide manifests itself in various forms each pointing towards greater and newer hazards for the less privileged in society.

A significant manifestation of the technological gulf is the intra-nation digital divide (the divide within nations) which emerges from the economic divide between the rich and the poor classes within any country. It has been linked with economic disadvantage, low levels of educational attainment, and other indicators of social disadvantage and quality of life. This divide exists within every nation, industrialized or developing. The ratios and numbers manifesting the intra-nation economic Digital Divide in India are very revealing and call for an analysis.

Building," Paper Presented at the 81st Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Associaton, New Orleans, LA, April 24-28,2000. Online Version, downloaded from the internet on 10.01.2006 from the website http://llk.media.mit.edu/papers/archive/aera2000.pdf.

5. See the Report of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, "The Digital Divide: ICT Development Indices 2004, Online Version Down loaded on 02.01.2006 from the web site, http://72.14.203.104/search?q=cache:X84xSjPd1UJ:stdev.unctad.org/docs/digitaldivide.doc+digital+divide+within+nations&hl=en&ie=UTF-8.

The problem is further compounded, with the emergence of a new elite group called the 'digerati'. The new emerging class of 'digerati' is comprised of the "beneficiaries of the enormous successful information technology industry and the other knowledge-based sectors of the economy such as biotechnology and pharmacology".[6] This is glaringly evident in Indian society especially with its profuse IT professionals ever on the increase. Kenneth Keninston's description of the emergence of this class is befitting in this context.

Time and again in India, for example, brilliant graduates of Indian Institutes of Technology or major engineering colleges and universities who chose to concentrate in the natural sciences, mechanical engineering or chemical engineering comment that their equally gifted classmates who entered computer science or biotechnology are now earning many times their incomes and living in an altogether different way... The lifestyle of the digerati tends to be cosmopolitan: they provide the clientele for the boutiques, the coffeehouses, the travel agencies, the pubs, and the international airways that whisk them to vacations or assignments in Singapore, London, Zurich, Mauritius, San Jose or Kathmandhu. On the outskirts of Chennai, Poona, Bangalore, Mumbai, Delhi, and Hyderabad luxury apartments are rising to house this new group. Although initially concentrated in information technology, this new digerati are also found, in varying degrees, in the biotech, pharmaceutical and other high-tech areas. In India, their salaries are still relatively low by Western standards, but, with annual salary growth rates of over 20% for five or ten years, far above those of their otherwise equally educated classmates in the last India.[7]

Another factor responsible for the digital divide is the linguistic and cultural divide. This divide is very real in India where only 5-8% of the population speaks English. In other words there are only around 80 millions of a total population of 1.1 billion who speak English. In addition to the linguistic inaccessibility there is also the issue of cultural irrelevance with regard to the content.

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6. Kenneth Keninston, "Introduction: The Four Digital Divides," in Kenneth Keniston and Deepak Kumar (eds) *Experience in India: Bridging the Digital Divide*, (New Delhi: Sage, 2004) 11-36, 17.

7. Ibid., 15

The third digital divide is the digital gulf between the rich and the poor nations, which is ever on the increase. What Kenneth Keniston has to say in this regard is worth taking into consideration.

At one extreme are the United States and the 'Nordic' countries like Sweden, Germany, Finland, and Iceland, where household telephone connectivity is well over 90%, computer saturation is over 50%, and home-based Internet connectivity averages over 50%. At the other extreme lies most of Africa, most of South America, South Asia, China, Indonesia, and so on — the 80% of the world where telephone connectivity is 3% or less (less than 30 million/1 billion in India), home computer ownership is 1 - 2% and Internet connectivity less than half of that.[8]

The global inequality in access to ICTs is indeed a reflection of other disparities between rich and poor nations. But insofar as ICTs are themselves enabling, facilitating, and wealth-creating, the international divide in information technology widens the already great gulf between North and South. Many groups have proposed several solutions with different analytical and diagnostic frameworks for examining and bridging the gaps caused by the multiple digital divides. Those who propose to look at the problematic from the view of the economic divide seek to solve the problem through methods that would eventually ensure social equity. The best representatives of this approach are the exponents of the Business View and the Public Corporations View.

Approaching the problematic in terms of the gap between nations that can and cannot afford technological investments, the Business View seeks to find solutions to the digital divide through advocating policies that advance industrial growth and development, promote international trade, share knowledge, and establish network of contacts. The chief exponent of this view is the World Information Technology and Services Alliance (WITSA), the global voice of the IT industry. This view however has its limitations when viewed from a Gender perspective. It does not take into account the social component of technology and its practices. Moreover such macro projects are gender neutral and does not incorporate any special concern for women.

Those who try to solve the problem of the international digital divide by adopting the Public Corporations View advocate funding the work

8. Ibid., 17

of scientists working in universities, private enterprise, government, and nonprofit organizations in developing countries and provide support to regional research networks and institutions in the Third World. This support is designed to build a corps of researchers in each country and to help develop the networks of people and institutions that can undertake effective research and use the results of research to effect change. Therefore they fund the research work of Third World scientists working on local problems and advocate policies that advance industrial growth and development, promote international trade, share knowledge, and establish network of contacts. When viewed from a critical perspective, this approach needs to take into account the need for gender analysis of projects. It should also take into consideration gender-specific cultural constraints because technology and its practices are culturally determined.

The E-Tech Professional View holds that imbalance in relationships between developed and developing economies is perpetuated by difference in spending on E-Technology. This is an approach propagated under the auspices of the UNESCO. Its main objectives are to bring together computer professionals to stimulate research, development and the application of information processing in science and human activity. Although the approach proposes to make the content of the Internet available in many different languages, and make it accessible to many through reduction of charges, feminists critique the apolitical nature of the approach. It fails to determine the unequal power relations within which technological practices are constructed.

The Feminist Critique

Cyber ethnographers and feminists call for a thorough investigation of existing theoretical models that propose to analyze and examine the multiple digital divides. They highlight the need of viewing technology and its practices as having a social component. Radhika Gajjala rightly says:

"Technological environments are social environments shaped around the use of any type of 'technology'. Such social environments are place-based and their structuring is shaped by local histories, geographical conditions, and everyday cultural practices within which specific technologies are put to use. It is important to emphasize the unequal power relations within which all the factors that shape such environments co-exist. In emphasizing such issues, the gender approach provides a

framework for analysis that helps articulate the gendering processes in a way that refuses to essentialize the notion of "woman" across contexts.....The gender approach does not imply that 'gender' equals 'women' ". [9]

Much of the digital divide literature is focused on questions of access to the technologies and on questions of literacy in a very literal way within linear narratives of Progress. A gender approach to the digital divide shifts the focus to the production of communities and selves in relation to technologies. This shift, allows for the examination of Gender, Sexualities, Class, Caste, and so on as shifting, embodied categories situated in everyday material practices. In doing so, it is important to highlight that privilege and lack are implicitly and explicitly associated with specific socio-cultural practices that get coded into specific bodies within specific contexts and hierarchies, producing value systems.

The Social Context of Technology

In order that a tool becomes a technology, it must fit into its social context.[10] A technology is an artifact, tool, machine or method that has been planned and designed in order to fulfill a particular task. "Tasks are taken on to accomplish goals defined within a social context, which gives the task and goal their meanings. Hence, to be a 'technology' a tool must fit into its social context. Otherwise it is simply an inanimate object."[11] Such a view of technologies implies that a technology project should be seen as a component of the social context in which it is

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9. Radhika Gajjala, "Cyberfeminist Technological Practices: Exploring Possibilities For a Women-Centered Design of Technological Environments," in UN/INSTRAW Virtual Seminar Series on Gender and ICTs, Seminar Two: Women and ICTs: Enabling and Disabling Environments, 15-26 July 2002, Online Edition down loaded on 13.12.2005 from the website http://www.uninstraw.org/en/docs/gender_and_ict/Gajjala.pdf

10. Sophia Huyer and Tatjana Sikosha, "Overcoming the Gender Digital Divide: Understanding ICTs and their Potential for the Empowerment of Women," in UN/INSTRAW Virtual Seminar Series on Gender and ICTs, Seminar Two: Women and ICTs: Enabling and Disabling Environments, 15-26 July 2002, Online Edition down loaded on 13.12.2005 from the website http://www.un-instraw.org/en/docs/gender_and_ict/sikosha.pdf

11. Layton Montgomery, "ICTs and their Gender Neutrality,"Online Edition down loaded on 13.12.2005 from the website http://www.un-instraw.org/en/docs/gender_and_ict/Montgomery.pdf

placed. Therefore it is important to fully comprehend the value and the power relations existing around a technology. The crucial factors to be identified are the social divisions that exist within a community based on gender, ethnicity, race, class, caste and so on as feminists rightly argue.

Gender is a crucial concept in understanding technological environments and their social contexts. Since both gender and technology are determined by the particular social context in which they are constructed, they should be seen as processes which evolve and change, rather than rigid and static entities.[12] As such it is possible to view gender and technology in a dynamic and context specific way. Therefore it is important to emphasize that technologies are not shaped by any social contexts but by a gendered one. Such an approach to technology which helps us to understand the interface between technology and gender has important analytical implications because on the one hand it helps us understand how gender perceptions shape and design technology and on the other hand it helps us to analyse how the environments in which the technologies are being placed determine the manner in which men and women employ and utilize these technologies.

Nancy J. Hafkins in her paper titled, "Are ICTs Gender Netural ? A Gender Analysis of Six Case Studies of Multi-Donor ICT Projects"[13] supports through case studies the position that ICTs are not a gender neutral technology. The use of ICTs and other technologies by women and men reflect to a large extent the wider socio-cultural and economic context within which the technologies are produced and used. In fact fewer women especially in developing countries have information technology skills than men and the number decreases as the skill level

12. Radhika Gajjala, "Cyberfeminist Technological Practices: Exploring Possibilities For a Women-Centered Design of Technological Environments," in UN/INSTRAW Virtual Seminar Series on Gender and ICTs, Seminar Two: Women and ICTs: Enabling and Disabling Environments, 15-26 July 2002, Online Edition down loaded on 13.12.2005 from the website http://www.un-instraw.org/en/docs/gender_and_ict/Gajjala.pdf

13. Nancy J. Hafkin, "Are ICTs Gender Neutral? A Gender Analysis of Six Case Studies of Multi-Donor ICT Projects," in UN/INSTRAW Virtual Seminar Series on Gender and ICTs, Seminar One: Are ICTs Gender Neutral?, 1-12 July 2002, Online Edition down loaded on 13.12.2005 from the website http://www.un-instraw.org/en/docs/gender_and_ict/Hafkin.pdf

rises. In terms of access to the technology women have fewer opportunities to master the techniques for using it. In addition they are discriminated against in content which is mostly available in the major European languages, which women are less likely to know than men. So too women have lesser access to the business benefits of the technology like Internet and telecommunications service licenses because no equal opportunity policies are followed in their distribution.

Lack of Visibility of Women

In order to understand the relationship of women with technologies including ICTs, it is important firstly to understand and analyze the gap between the ratio of men and women in the field. While there is a gradual increase of women in the sector the inside story is more nuanced and needs an analysis. Much of the rhetoric that surrounds the phenomenon of ICTs is blindly celebratory.

Disparity in Numbers

The lack of visibility of women is evident in different levels. Firstly according to facts published by the UNICEF in 2004 with reference to India, there exists a wide gap between the presence of women and men in the IT sector. Only 23% of the Internet users are women. In the ICT sector for every 100 male employees there are only 37 female employees. In the software industry the ratio of women to men is 20:80. The men-women ratio of IT professionals in India is 76:24. The statistics point to the fact that in order to understand the relationship of women with technologies including ICTs, it is important to understand the discrepancies and other subtle features in the small numbers of women in the ICT industry and as users of ICTs.

Huyer and Sikosha highlight the presence of multiple reasons for this occurrence. First and foremost is the problem of perception as a result of the influence of social and cultural stereotypes. Mainstream media strengthen social preconceptions that women are less suited to or interested in working with technology. This is augmented by the fact of the substantially and comparatively smaller numbers of women in the industry than men. In a seminar on ICTs organized by the UN, the participants emphasized that women's lack of engagement in the technology industry is due to gender inequality and not due to women's lack of compatibility with technology. The discussions also highlighted that unequal access to education and lack of economic independence

are some of the structural gender inequalities that prevented women from a stronger engagement with technology.[14] Even in instances of increase in the number of women in the field, women's relationship with technology is not necessarily equal to that of men. The important issue therefore is not merely a lack of women with expertise in these areas, "but rather the persistence of barriers women face due to disabling socio-cultural and managerial environments at work and at home."[15]

Absence in Managerial Levels

Yet another area where the gender aspect of the digital divide evident is in the lack of visibility of women in managerial, administrative and policy making levels in the ICT sector. In an article entitled "Why Just a few women on top?"[16] the writers say that few women hold top IT jobs in India. This has little to do with lack of capability. Women are exiting jobs to fulfill family commitments. The Dataquest-Jobs Ahead Study, conducted among 1.5 lakh Indian IT professionals—found that women constitute over 19% of the total workforce at lower levels (up to three years of experience). The number drops to 6% of the senior workforce, that is with more than 10 years of experience. The study showed that married women outnumber men in low experience categories but in 10+ years, the stage in which serious seniority should come in, a large number of women either opt out or accept less demanding roles. At lower experience levels a healthy 19% of the workforce comprises women, but their ratio falls steadily as experience levels rise. At senior levels women constitute only 6% of the workforce.

According to the Dataquest-Jobsahead survey women rise up the ladder faster than their male counterparts. Women in general achieve any given role and position at lower levels of experience. The survey finds that on an average, a woman team leader is 4 years younger than her male counterpart and a woman program manager is 2.8 years younger than her male colleagues. Thus women as the study shows reach key positions faster than men. However the oxymoron is that few women

14. "Overcoming the Gender Digital Divide..." Op. Cit., 19

15. "Overcoming the Gender Digital Divide: Understanding ICTs and their Potential for the Empowerment of Women," Op. Cit.,.14

16. Manjiri Kalghatgi and Rishi Seth, "Why Just a Few Women on Top?",Monday June 30, 2003, Online Version, http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2005/07/03/stories/2005070301570100.htm

reach higher levels. The percentage of women employees in IT companies gradually drops at higher levels, say for instance, at the vice-president or CXO stage. In other words growth for women IT professionals often stop at the team leader stage. This is because of the family demands and the stereotyped roles and gendered roles heaped on them by cultural restrictions.

The demands of high responsibility also play a great role in keeping women from accepting such jobs. Gita Dang, head of technology practice at Korn & Ferry says, "Women have traditionally shied away from sales responsibilities, because it involves a great deal of travel. The bulk of the important selling in the Indian software industry, for instance, happens overseas. It is these business development people who blossom into the CXO roles. Women are left behind as team leaders only."[17] The survey reveals interesting data about relocation preferences of both sexes, it is clear that women are far less willing to relocate as a result of family demands. The willingness to relocate is a major factor that drives the growth of IT professionals.

A Third Level of Invisibility

There is yet another level of invisibility which adds to the gendered nature of the digital divide and technological practices. It refers to the disintegration of the self and subjectivities brought about by the BPO sector. In an article entitled, "Are Indian BPOs Slave Ships," which is a study by the V.V. Giri National Institute of Labour, the authors describe the appalling working conditions in India's hi-tech business process outsourcing companies. The study highlights that the degree of surveillance required at work can be compared with situations of nineteenth century prisons or Roman slave ships. Though the IT body NASSCOM and Call Centres have denied these charges there is a great concern over flouting of labour laws in these centres. It is significant for our argument here to emphasize that the ratio of men to women is reversed in the ITES-BPO (Information Technology Enabled Services – Business Processes Outsourcing) sector. The ratio of men to women in this sector is 31:69. This means that out of the 348,000 young men and women in Indian cities working in the BPO industry around 200,000

17. Gita Dang, in Manjiri Kalghatgi and Rishi Seth, "Why Just a Few Women on Top?",Monday June 30, 2003, Online Version - http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2005/07/03/stories/2005070301570100.htm

are women. The BPO industry is a subset of the IT industry. With its night shifts, the industry has its own unique conditions that pose impediments to achieving a good work-life balance for women. Offering a reason as to why women professionals tend not to rise above a certain level, Prakash Toppo, who heads the HR at Global Vantedge says, "Night shifts put an additional pressure on all employees in the ITES sector. For women, it becomes even more challenging and hence the burnout is much higher. Marriage more or less forces women to quit night shift operations."[18]

In recent years, India has become the largest and fastest-growing offshore site for US call centers. Since 2000, over 400 independent call centers have been set up in India, in addition to a big expansion in call center operations run by multinationals. Most call centers are classified as ITES-BPO Information Technology Enabled Services: Business Process Outsourcing. This industrial category in India earned 5.7 billion dollars in revenue in FY 2004-5; revenues have increased at over 50% per year since 2000. Total employment in ITES in fiscal year 2004-5 was 348,000 FY 2004-5, almost double the employment of 180,000 in FY 2002-03 as published by NASSCOM in 2005.[19]

Call Centres! - Enabling or Disenabling the Self?

Indian feminists have been critical of call center employment. Many call the workers "cyber coolies". They also rightly point out many problems with call centers. Some of the issues are related to Health effects of working night shifts.[20] "The continued stress and strain at work lead to circumstances where the female workers cannot carry on, especially during pregnancy and in situations of 'double burden' of work at family and workplace."[21] Yet another factor is the loss of identity created by serving foreign customers and speaking with an American

18. Ibid., 4.

19. Doreen J. Mattingly, "Indian Call Centres: The Outsourcing of 'Good Jobs' for Women," in http://www.globaljusticecenter.org/papers2005/mattingly_eng.htm http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2005/07/03/stories/2005070301570100.htmhttp://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2005/07/03/stories/2005070301570100.htm

20. Cf. Singh and Pandey, The Voice of the Working Woman : The dark side of the Sunshine Sector, 24(11) November, 2004, 21-22 for such an analysis.

21. Ibid., 23.

or British accent. The loss of identity is also created by the change of names that takes place. Indian names are changed to Western Christian names.

Annapurna, a young woman of 23, working in a call centre in Bangalore says:

When I return home every morning after having attended 50-60 calls, I have problems talking with my parents in an accent they will understand. Since I respond to the 60 calls as Ann Marie, I almost forget that I am really Annapurna outside the call centre. Though working in the call centre gives me economic independence it is as if I am losing somewhere a part of me.[22]

A third factor is the high degree of surveillance of workers and the high pressure to meet unreasonable quotas. Supervisors can and do listen into calls at random, and computers generate daily reports of the performance of workers. Finally the call centre does not offer creative opportunities for promotion or acquiring transferable skills. One Indian study, for example, argued that a majority of youngsters especially women are engaged in a 'dead-end' career, where the workers do not ever move up the job ladder within their organization."[23] Studies that have looked at the domestic space- work space balance of married female call centre workers found women workers continued to be responsible for most housework. Based on this pattern we can conclude that the occupation "has not really changed gender relations at home".[24]

While on the one hand women working in call centres experience some loss of identity on the other hand Women working in call centers are also empowered in some ways. Firstly through the implicit rejection of traditional patterns of family and control over daughters they are resisting subordination. Call centers make possible a rejection of a submissive, dependent role. It is also interesting to note that despite the commonplace understanding of women working in call centres as sexually promiscuous, frivolous and 'loose' because they go out in the night many of the workers described the international environment of the call centre as physically and sexually safe for women. This is what Mallika who had previously worked in one of the export houses in Bangalore said in this regard:

22. Interview of 13.12.2005.
23. Doreen J. Mattingly, 8.
24. Doreen J. Mattingly, Op. Cit., 6

In my previous office guys would make sexual innuendos and sometimes even ask for sexual favours. But here in the call centre, I could say, 'just shut up', but there I could not say it...All those things do not happen in call centers. A woman can be very spontaneous and freely speak her mind.[25]

Secondly call centres also give economic independence to women. Measures of Salaries in the industry vary. One recent study of call center workers found 53% had monthly salaries over Rs 10,000 while another study reported a majority of monthly salaries were below Rs 10,000. A survey conducted by NASSCOM, the Indian organization serving IT companies, reported median monthly salary for entry level "customer care executives" to be Rs. 11,200, and Rs 16,700 for senior CCEs. The discrepancy in the reports is probably due to the variation in salaries due to incentives paid for meeting performance targets.[26] This salary is quite high especially for young graduates coming straight from college. It is almost twice the average monthly salary of Rs. 5900 reported in the 2001 census for all employed college educated women in India, and ten times the national minimum wage of Rs 1000 per month as mentioned in the Census of India, 2002.[27]

Conclusion

The two issues that I have analysed here are the different levels of the lack of visibility of women in the ICT sector and the issues of subjectivities and self in the BPO sector. Both the analyses point to the complexity of the interface between gender and the digital divide and call for a complex understanding of technology and its practices. The first analysis pointed to the need of an investigation of the unequal power relations in society and the gendered and cultural roles and environments that influence women's involvement in the sector. The second analysis showed that women's presence in the field is colored by ambiguity, a border passage which women often negotiate with dividends despite its contentious nature. Only when the different strands of the problematic, both the contradictory and the supportive, the evident and the ambiguous are held together in an analytic tension can we do justice to the burgeoning field of the growing nexus between technology and gender.

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25. Interview of 13.12.2005. 26. Doreen J. Mattingly,8. 27. Ibid.,10.

Internet and Inter-Religious Dialogue

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The author qualified in computer science is presently a research scholar attached to the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras. In this contribution he explores a new and innovative area of inter-religious dialogue – namely dialogue through internet. He maintains that this form of dialogue could contribute to harmony, peace and understanding among the various traditions, besides increasing our knowledge about them. In particular he highlights the importance of this form of inter-religious dialogue for the youth who are among the foremost users of internet.

The phenomenal growth in the use of internet and the precarious situation of intolerance and communal violence due to religious fundamentalism in the country in the last decade raises the question of the new technology, particularly the internet could be used for initiating such cyber dialogue among religions and to strive after communal harmony. It is time for us to reflect on this innovative media which helps to nurture human communication at a deeper religious level. We shall enquire into the possibility of establishing online dialogue which will offer the hope to develop an interrelationship among the different religions, and creatively build a peaceful world where people of different cultures and religions can respect one another and live in harmony. Here the term 'online dialogue' refers to a new way of inter-religious dialogue in and through Internet.

Internet for Religious Goals

Internet has been offering an opportunity to practice one's religious rites, to continue the journey of spiritual enlightenment and to experience the transcendent. First, let us explore how the various religious traditions make use of the internet to perform its rituals and create virtual spiritual experience for the believers.

Christian websites deal with individual and global communities providing information and spiritual direction. Numerous websites have been developed focusing on helping people grow in their relationship with God. Some of the catholic websites are designed to receive prayer requests of those who visit the sites. Few online church websites like 'His for ever' site (www.his-forever.com), and theooze site (www.theooze.com) ask for visitor's names and request to be shared in the church communities. A particular example for the Christian online practice is 'the Church for all web' site (www.churchforall.org). This site is designed to provide an alternative to more traditional venues of Christian ritual practice. It is a virtual church which brings God's message to its members. The central component of this page is Worship Time (www.churchforall/worship.htm) which contains the rubrics and text for a ritual one can perform while online.

Considering the Hindu websites, we could note the online practice used by the Hindu brethren from the following illustration. We know that in our country when a woman is warned of bad luck by an astrologer, she has to forestall the cruel fate by appealing to the gods. "In the old days, she might have taken her astrologer's advice factually and made above 900 mile journey to a temple on the southern trip of India to pay respects to Shani – the Hindu god she was said to have angered"[1] Today in this digital world she does not make a long journey to visit the temple but connects the Internet and turns to the web page www.prathana.com where she can choose from a list of hundred temples and arrange for an appropriate pooja (ceremony). In this way millions of Hindus who live outside the country could make arrangements for the various religious rites and get spiritual assistance through the religious websites.

Varieties of Islamic religious expressions are available online. These religious websites facilitate the Muslims to understand the Qur'an in a better way. Various methods have been used to integrate the Qur'an in a digital framework, many of which are designed for specific levels of understanding - readers range from fluent in classical or Qur'anic Arabic to those who have limited knowledge of Arabic. Islamic websites have propagation of faith and offer cultural and religious interpretation of

1 Srinivasan, S. "*Religion Online: Hindus Turn to the Internet for Prayer.*" http://www.wwrn.org, January 07 2006.

Islam. The Islam Online site (www.islamonline.net) is a prominent example of Islamic religious sites which help the visitors to understand the Islamic faith.

There are some religious websites which express non-religious forms of spirituality and practices and have created a site to practice a religion outside the sphere of religious traditions. The spirituality in this context, refers to the human search for the "meaning significance"[2]. Clubbers Temple Website (www.clubberstemple.com), for example, has created a site for spiritual online dialogue, and potentially it facilitates new form of religious community which has space for the people of all faiths.

The Dialogue Imperative in the Age of Information

Dialogue means a way of encountering and understanding oneself and the world at the deepest level, opening up possibilities of grasping the fundamental meanings of life, individually and collectively, and its various dimensions. This in turn transforms the way we deal with ourselves, others, and the world. Indeed the word "dialogue" is in theory most appropriate to describe the nature of this meeting of minds. Dialogue is not the only way that the individuals or groups interact; but it is one which is indispensable for inner peace, and for peace in the world.[3] Dialogue encourages a positive spin on humanity's capacity for goodness and expresses a desire for living a life with ethical integrity.

Twenty-first century is indeed in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand religion generates values, beliefs and it influences the society through its beliefs and practices. At the heart of every culture lies a religion or a set of beliefs. Our beliefs shape our values, relationships, and actions. Moreover there is also a growing sense of dialogue and mutual enrichment between various religious and cultural traditions. On the other hand fundamentalism is increasing especially in religions, based on the feeling of superiority and absolutistic claims. Religion also becomes a dividing factor and a cause for communal tension. Religious sentiments are misused. Religious ideas lead to conflict and violence.

In recent years there have been series of communal riots in our country. Some religious fundamentalist movements have created conflict in our society, and they have led to more violence and agony. Religious,

2 Jones, C., G. Wainwright, *The Study of Spirituality* (London:SPCK), 1986.

3 Ibid. p.135.

cultural and ethnic differences have led to misunderstanding, hostility, and conflict. Today, war and cultural, ethnic and religious prejudice and violence not only thrive, but also threaten all areas with annihilation. Hence, there is a necessity to bring about harmony among various religions and to establish the mutual relations among the followers of different religions by removing the prejudices and building healthy appreciation of each other's heritage. "There will be no peace among the nations unless there is peace among the religions; there will be no peace among the religions unless there is dialogue between them."[4]

In an age of worldwide struggle of humankind for survival and liberation from the religious conflict and war, religions and technologies have their important contributions to make, which can only be worked out in a mutual and global dialogue. In this important and urgent task, the Internet offers a very effective medium for such an initiative to overcome from the sharp divisions, conflicts and sufferings of humankind. The younger generations like to spend much of their time in the internet where they meet virtually their friends- members of the virtual communities - establishing a world wide relationship. As the youth show much interest in the new digital media, the Internet offers the opportunity to instil the spirit of tolerance and harmony in the religions and remove prejudice towards other religions.

Online Dialogue: An Innovation in Religious Dialogue

The world is becoming a smaller place and new media technology is becoming the driving force behind the social change. The modern man who lives in the age of information desires to be more reasonable, more tolerant, and more open towards new ideas. Modern means of communication and human interaction have produced a global village. Internet Media firms try to maintain their audience through online communication. Global connectivity allows people from different parts of the globe to interact with each other effectively. Internet expresses the collective experience and unifies emotionally and symbolically in an active participation. It brings social changes and greater equality in the distribution of information and the consequent socio economics by focusing developmental activities on the upcoming generation of the

4 David J. Hawkin, *The Twenty – first Century Confronts Its Gods: Globalization, Technology, and War* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), p.18.

society. The World Wide Web is an effective tool to link people together and to exchange knowledge and experience and to plunge in a collective action for the development of the modern society.

These technological advancements will also make significant progress in establishing dialogue as a valid and preferred approach in dealing with conflicts arising from cultural and religious differences. Since the new medium offers a new hope for the religious traditions, inter-religious dialogue could be promoted in and through Internet to enhance the people of different religions as an effective means to present and explain their own faiths, to exchange their religious values and reflect and discuss the reality of life. How is it possible to have such an enterprise through Internet? Venerable Mattanando Bhikkhu says:

"If we approach the method of the modern inter-religious dialogue in a slightly critical manner, we may see that it is a very effective social technique for the organizer of the dialoguing process to preserve the common value among the people. By generating a pacific atmosphere for all spiritual faiths, the process could bring some aspects from other religions which do not exist in theirs, as their means of achievement."[5]

As this medium creates virtual communities, digital dialogue can enhance to build up their relationships expressing mutual human care and searching for mutual understanding. This sort of dialogue would be very practical, concerned with the problems of modern life. It is notable that many organizations have succeeded in establishing online-communities where they share their common interest and experience. Reformed Churches in the West have already started to reach the believers and non-believers of the church through the internet.

Online Dialogue in the Indian Context

The increasing use of Internet in India cannot be ignored, as it has already penetrated every sphere of human enterprise. It has a global access and offers a lot of scope to exchange and spread information and knowledge, thus paving the way for communication and co-habitation. Religions have already started to use electronic media to propagate their beliefs and practices. Internet connects the whole world

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5 Venerable Mattanando Bhikkhu, Buddhist Himalaya, *The Role of Buddhism in Inter-religious Dialogue*: A Journal of Nagarjuna Institute of Exact Methods Vol. II No. I & II, 1989.

and has created a kind of *online religion*. Cyber space has become a place where religions converge and share their resources with the whole world. They may even bring about alternatives regarding new ways of being spiritual and religious. Hence, it would be a good opportunity to establish inter-religious dialogue in and through Internet in India in order to bring about unity, peace and harmony among various religions.

Media is often misused by the political and religious powers. In countries like India, it is indeed a challenge for the media to deliver its goods to common people in a conflictual situation. Cyber Space allows for the end of dominance by the big over the small and to end discrimination based on race, colour, gender and social class. Moreover it is also very democratic, and could be kept outside the control of the dominant exploitative powers. The number of people who use Internet is increasing in India because the internet is very economic and swift and promises to be accessible to every one and it is easily available for all those who have an account in the global net. Internet is a potential media to develop a genuine relation among people and can help to overcome obstacles of belief and lead to greater openness to other forms of religious experience and promote participation in a religious community. Dialogue in the Internet can bring about a common understanding of the religions in India which is plagued by fundamentalism. The new medium of dialogue also would bring about national and international welfare, and openness to other faiths. It may be a key to promoting vigorous dialogue among religions for worldwide peaceful coexistence.

Conclusion

New technology profoundly structures social life and transforms contemporary society into a better one. It has become a culture. It makes up a "signifying system through which the social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored."[6] Cyber space - as a sacred space - offers values for the human life and varieties of experience. Within this new form of social interaction people have formed communities in Cyberspace even though they may be separated by thousands of miles. The Internet as a new medium has become a canvas of professional _expression, a place to learn and test new ways of being.

6 R. Williams, *Television, Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Scocken Books, 1974), 13.

It creates new spaces of spiritual and social interaction on websites. It is also being conceptualised as a spiritual or sacramental space as people transport their spiritual and religious space online.[7] Through this new medium we become more deeply in touch with the common ground which is the source of our own world and the world of others.

Through this online dialogue, we can promote peace and harmony, better understanding of religion and creative cooperation among cultures and religions, while acknowledging and accepting their differences. People of different worldviews and believers of different faiths can learn from each other. This technological dialogue "not only connects the disparate human groups — social, economic, ethnic, national, ideological, cultural, and religious but also capture, combine, and channel the dynamic energy of diversity into community building and networking — locally, nationally and globally."[8]

Teens and youth are among the pioneers of online life. Among the Internet users, youth are the majority who surf the Net, making them the most wired demographic group in the world. Modern technology has constructed the special and privileged space of youth to nurture them through shared experience. Every third Indian belongs to the age group of youth and together with children the persons below 34 years form more than two thirds of the nation's total population.[9] The global media, the Internet, may well impact on the way in which relationships are managed, due to the dynamic nature of interaction through this medium that creates a place for adult knowledge and common experience. It raises awareness among young people, and will actively serve to create a culture of peace and solidarity, cooperation and dialogue.

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7 Lorne L. Dowson, *Religion Oline*, p.108.

8 The Power and Promise of deep- Dialogue, online: http://astro.temple.edu, 10 October 2005.

9 Roy Lazer Anthonisamy, *Youth Violence and Pastoral Care*, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003), p. 40.

Religion and Digital Technology in Interaction

A. L Sebastian

The author is lecturer in the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras. This article is an explorative study of the impact of Information and Communication Technologies on religious systems and vice-versa. Disclosing the possibilities for human enhancement that the interacting worlds of religion and technology make available, the analysis highlights the emergence of a new transcendent self shaped by and from within the parameters of technology. Electronic media, the article posits, generates not only new selves but also the means by which these selves will come into new kinds of communities. Interaction with digital technology thus changes who we are and how we experience ourselves as possibilities for action.

Introduction

Today's revolution in technology involves a fundamental reshaping of the elements by which people comprehend the world about them, and verify and express what they comprehend. The constant availability of images and ideas, and their rapid transmission even from continent to continent, have profound consequences, both positive and negative, for the psychological, moral and social development of persons, the structure and functioning of societies, intercultural communications, and the perception and transmission of values, world views, ideologies, and religious beliefs. In this context this article takes an explorative look at how our technologically enabled society has used technology to change its perspective on religion. From creating new mystical forces in our lives, to changing the way we look at more traditional religions, the increasing impact of technology is changing the way humans perceive their environment. This article will first dwell upon the relation between religion and technology and secondly it will explore how religion and technology are interacting and affecting each other.

Some Ground Rules and Definitions

It would seem, at first consideration that religion and technology have little to do with each other. Having a PC or an internet connection does not bring me closer to God, nor would these technological things provide with support for faith, or denial of doubt. Likewise, one would not normally admit that praying to God or faith in a holy scripture would provide technological benefits— my printer is not going to work better, nor will these things keep a web server from crashing. Both technology and religion are commonly considered to have impact in the breadth of a person's life, though the impact on each other seems tenuous[1]. However, when we take a closer look at these two facets of humanity, we find that the two are growing more and more interlocked, and sometimes even interchangeable.

Before we even delve into this topic, we should definitely set some ground rules, and define some terms. When we speak of 'religion', we could mean a hundred different things. I choose to think about religion as a formalized belief structure, with answers for unknowable conditions, and a faith in the unknown[2]. This could be embodied in a modern western theological religion such as Christianity— it provides explanations for the unknown (a loved one's death, or natural disasters), answers for the unknown (what happens when we die?), and a God to put faith in. This is the more abstract 'religion' that I would choose to talk about at this time, for it allows us to discuss a more generalized religion.

Likewise, we should choose to figure out what we mean by 'technology'. Technology is a wide ranging, mutating manifestation of modern culture. It might be best to simply describe technology as new manifestations of humanity's cleverness. The internet is a wonderful example of clever people figuring out how to share information. This is not quite enough to describe it, though, perhaps, we can also narrow our current working definition to publicly accessible technology as 'practical application of scientific knowledge'[3]. From this working

1 Anthony G. Roman, Texting God: SMS and Religion in the Philippines, In Journal of the Asian Research center for Religion and Social Communication, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2005,pp.41-59.

2 Claire Hoertz Badaracco, Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion and Culture, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004, pp.11-14.

3 Ibid, pp.112-113

definition, we can push forward, and try and understand the relationship between religion and technology.

The Relationship between Technology and Religion

It is well-known that technological developments bring about considerable changes in the human behaviors and ideas. In fact, a technological change as such means a change in the human attitudes and behaviors[4]. The changes observed in the fields of transportation and telecommunication have visible effects on the social and cultural life. Along with technological developments, people change their perspectives on how to perform a task and thus they begin to adjust themselves to the new practices[5].

Of course, this does not mean that we can readily accept a set of values peculiar to technology. It is one thing to say 'technology can lead to drastic changes in social and cultural life' and still another thing to say 'technology creates its own system of values'[6]. The seemingly indispensable values of modern technology are indeed the values created by a broader social milieu including technology itself. Probably, the most important issue which needs to be discussed here is whether technology can create values or not. Therefore, the basic question which calls for an answer to this context is: "Is it possible to adapt a technology without undergoing any religious and ethical change?"

In other words, in bringing about significant changes in both the social fabric of a society and its system of values, does technology serve an impartial/ neutral task or does it present certain values? We have to elaborate on this question carefully. Because, whether we will be able to avoid the unwanted consequences of technology will be made quite clear to a great extent, according to the answer given to this question.

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4 Stephen D. O'Leary, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks," In Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (eds.), Religion online, Finding Faith on the Internet, New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 37-58.

5 Kenneth D. Loomis, "Spiritual Students and Secular Media," In Journal of Media and Religion, Vol.3, No.3, 2004, pp. 151-164.

6 Lance W. Bennett, "New Media Power: The Internet and Global Activism", In Nick Couldry and James Curran, (Eds.), Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media In a Networked World, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, INC, 2003, pp.17-38.

According to the ones regarding technology as a neutral device, we should be in quest for the ways of putting the opportunities into practice, which are presented by technology in proper ways. As for the proponents of this idea, what leads to the deaths of humans is not the bombs but the other humans producing them. If it is possible to make use of technology both in helpful and harmful ways, then technology alone is neither beneficial nor hazardous.

This idea is not essentially wrong. Actually, technology alone cannot be considered to serve as a 'value-creator' or 'value-destructor'. If it were really considered in this way, we would not really be thinking of getting rid of the harmful effects of technology, instead, we would have to reject technology to free ourselves of these effects[7]. But if we take the definition of modern technology, 'practical application of scientific knowledge', it will be seen that in the background of technology is a sort of value system which comes along with modern science.

It is a fact that the industrialised societies have begun to resemble one another in time. Owing to this resemblance, however, it is discussed that culture will develop in such a way as to create a unity in fundamental values, just as religion[8].

Briefly speaking, it is possible to consider various views on the opinions about the relation between technological and cultural values in two basic groups: The First group claims that national cultures will not eventually perish as a result of technological developments, while the Second group, is simply against technology as they believe that technological developments will inevitably lead to such a consequence. In their view, technology is harmful in essence[9].

From this theoretical discussion let us try to explore how religion and technology are interacting and affecting each other.

Technology affecting Religion

In the fifteenth century, Johann Gutenberg changed the world with

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7 John P. Jewell, Wired for Ministry: How the Internet, Visual Media and other New Technologies Can Serve Your Church, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004, pp.189

8 Stephen D. O'Leary, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks,", pp. 37-58.

9 Ibid, p.44.

the introduction of the printing press, and the new proliferation of bibles. This was one of the first examples of information dissemination on a mass scale, and it had repercussions on society at large, as well as religion specifically. The Enlightenment can be seen as one of the results of this dissemination, as information began to be more available and tenable[10].

Today technology has become the religion. If we look back to our working definition of religion, we might actually be able to understand the above statement. Today, we are taught that what we read in the newspaper, or see on TV, or get on net is true, or as truthful as can be at the present time. We believe in the truthfulness of what we are told, and are told about things that are unknown to us. They all embody belief structures of some kind, and relate to the population at large in a manner similar to a religion. These technologies are becoming religions of the modern world[11].

Hopefully, we realize that there is a difference between journalism and religion, and that it's not just superficial. With a religion, there is an attempt to explain the world as in journalism, but on a more spiritual level. A journalist will describe a tragic bomb blast at a market place with emotion and implicit moral description, but this type of morality is in sharp contrast to the moral framework that a religion would try to instill. One is ascriptive in nature, while the other is descriptive. With this in mind, we might be able to see how the new information climate brought about by technology is challenging established institutions, just as when the printing press brought the bible to a wider readership.

Technology is affecting religion in other ways as well. The emergent ability to search, calculate, and cross-reference texts such as the Bible have led to such discoveries as the Bible Code and other publications of the same nature. Online Bibles and concordances, or even portable electronic versions allow the wired Christian to access the Bible in new and curious ways. Searching for an appropriate verse no longer relies on a strong library of memorized verses. This externalization of memory

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10 David Porter, User's Guide to the Media, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988, p.9.

11 Claire Hoertz Badaracco, Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion and Culture, p.35.

also has the ability to change how humanity faces any information exchange. It may be through the digitalization of familiar things, like the Bible, that many people will become comfortable with new technologies.

If we expand the context of the conversation beyond mainstream religions, we would also see significant changes in how other religions or religious sects spread their presence and get themselves known. They disseminate information on everything from frequently asked questions and answers, to listings of festivals and historical reference. Information that used to be difficult to share and spread due to monopoly of few are now freely distributed online[12]. Potential members, or just curious web patrons can observe the information that is published, pursuing contact information if so desired.

Beyond this, we also find organized faiths or practices taking new shapes and methods. People begin to fulfill their religious obligations or requirements through internet or sometimes find substitutes for them. An important distinction between religious affiliations with tangible communities of people and those online is that emphasis relies solely on the individual when religious observance is online. Although there may be substantially greater numbers of people all actively participating in religious groups online, they are less linked to one another than those who all attend a physical church service or function together. Followers go online and download sermons or read religious texts in the privacy of their own homes, at their own convenience. This lack of physical community worries the mainstream religions. Religion online allows the user control in their involvement within their chosen faith and allows them to define their own terms of the religion. They can be involved in a huge variety of religions online, rather than committing themselves to one as is more commonly practiced in "real life[13]."

Similarly cult activities are flourishing on the internet. The Heaven's Gate, for example, is a cult that achieved notoriety when the group of 39 web developers committed suicide together. Mockery also abounds, in the form of the Cult of the Dead Cow, the Church of Beavis Christ,

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12 Amanda Sturgill, "Scope and Purposes of Church Web Sites," In Journal of Media and Religion, Vol.3, No.3, 2004, pp. 164-178.

13 Stephen D. O'Leary, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks,", pp. 37-58.

or Jesus' homepage[14]. All of these religious perspectives can be spread effectively and efficiently through the internet.

Another interesting aspect of technology affecting mainstream religions is with respect to their monopoly over ethics and moral authority. The new technology creates a situation in which nothing is bound by borders. This has immensely important consequences. They challenge the traditional cultural homes like marriage, family, religion, church, hierarchy, caste etc. All these structures which claimed moral authority over people are by this technology just set aside by exposure and awareness. Similarly through public discussions and debates questions are raised about the ethical truths. The understanding of Euthanasia as a sin and unacceptable at any time is being questioned today. Contrary opinions that challenge any authoritarian claims to absolute truth are voiced. At the same time emphasis is placed on the contextual and specific nature of truth claims.[15]

Technology has been influencing many different aspects of religious activity, though it has not effectively changed the way we are spiritual human beings. I doubt if anyone would believe that their spirituality has been affected directly by technology. Technology, in this directed consideration, only allows us to realize the potential that has always been present in the human psyche[16].

The increasing availability and dissemination of information, thanks largely to the internet, has helped those who are inclined towards religion to realize their inclinations. Of course there are those people who do not believe that the Internet has the ability to present the subject of religion. Many feel that it is impersonal and too much of a loss of the physical part of religion. Obviously it is not the same as going to church. Although at the same time, some believe that the lack of tangible religious aspects only adds to the benefits. They believe that the mentality of religion will be encouraged. It is almost inevitable that this form of technology will alter religion in some way or another, although exactly how, is uncertain.

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14 Lam Lye, "More than Just the Blues," In Reader's Digest, April 2005, pp. 40-45.

15 Claire Hoertz Badaracco, Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion and Culture, p.54.

16 Kenneth D. Loomis, "Spiritual Students and Secular Media,", pp. 151-164.

17 www.socio.demon.co.uk/ magazine/7/wertheim.html

Religion affecting Technology

The first thing to consider how religion and religious tendencies have been affecting technology can be seen on a personal level. The spiritual identity of an individual is affected by the process of attaining transcendence. It is believed that "the hunger for transcendence...is part of the essence of what it means to be human" . Interestingly enough, the internet itself can be viewed as a form of transcendence. Without completely abandoning the body, it allows for intellectual/spiritual freedom without the physical restrictions of time or space. Stephen Wittaker says the typical "cyberspace enthusiast" is "someone who desires embodiment and disembodiment in the same instant...[and] to enjoy the pleasures of the physical body, but without any of its weaknesses or restrictions"[17]. This interpretation of internet users' loose connection to the body with complete freedom of mind closely parallels the religious concept of transcendence. Because of the internet, a person's identity has taken on long-held religious beliefs that there is more to a person than their worldly body.

In many circumstances, technology is also perceived to be a path to utopia. This pattern draws from the religious promise of a heaven if the correct behavior is acted out here on earth[18]. Likewise, if we use technology correctly, we find ourselves being promised a panacea for all the worlds' problems. There is a new force in the world: the growth of cyberspace provides us with the way to destroy evils inherent in age, economic, gender, or cultural discrimination[19].

The common aim of technology is providing us all with some sort of salvation and transition into a better world. We can accomplish this by behaving in the right ways online, supporting the right things, and allowing things we disagree with to operate with our tolerance. By this surely we can all develop cyberspace into a utopia where everyone can find the things that interest them, interact with those people who share the same interests, etc. This seems like a heaven, and all we have to do is to behave appropriately, and we'll end up there eventually.

It did not take religion long to adapt itself to cyberspace. There are countless numbers of sites and an endless supply of diversity among

18 Kenneth D. Loomis, "Spiritual Students and Secular Media", pp. 151-164.

19 Rich Ling, The Mobile Connection, The Cellphone's Impact on Society, San Francisco, CA: Morgan Kauffmann Publishers, 2004, p. 44.

them. There are sites from everything from Jehovah's Witnesses, to Chen Tao, to a group that believes the Internet is a deity,. Along with this diversity is the freedom of expression. It is possible for almost anyone to put any idea onto the web. Because of this, countless numbers of different religions are surfacing. People are able to obtain religious information that was not available to them before. There are public discussions and debates going on all the time. As a result, it is possible for an atheist, to chat with a Hindu, a Christian, to chat with a Jew, and so on. It allows everyone possible to see a common thread in the religions and develops growth between them[20].

The Internet is also providing an opportunity to those in small, disperse religions to communicate with others of the same faith. The gap that they are facing geographically is closed by the technology[21]. People who have never met before are able to communicate on a common ground. It is very possible that a move towards greater religious diversity in the world will result from the Internet.

Conclusion

The true nature of this relationship between religion and technology is a difficult and broad issue, which needs a profound socio-philosophical and theological analysis. However, when we consider more general definitions of 'religion' and 'technology', we find that the two are closely interlocked. With many of the points raised in this paper, we can conclude that as technology pushes forward, I feel that religion and religious behavior will follow along with it. The relationship between religion and technology is being led by technological change - established religious systems are merely struggling to keep up. However, it is the basic nature of religion (as a belief system) that will still be around no matter how far technology advances.

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20 Stephen D. O'Leary, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks", pp. 37-58.

21 Amanda Sturgill, "Scope and Purposes of Church Web Sites", pp. 164-178.

Spirituality Online?

Roy Lazar A.

Dr. Roy, a lecturer in the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, shows how communication technologies have permeated all spheres of human life including religion and spirituality. His article attempts to understand the tenets of spirituality in the language of cyber-world and to recognise how megabytes and gigabytes of Internet help the age-old spiritual quest of human beings for total harmony and eternal bliss.

As an IT nerd is crossing the road he meets a frog who tells him, "If you kiss me, I'll turn into a beautiful princess, stay with you for a week and do anything you want." The IT nerd smiles and puts the frog in his pocket. "Did you hear me?" says the frog. "I'll do anything for a week". The nerd ignores it. "Oy! What are you playing at?" the frog shouts again "A beautiful princess? For a week? That is irresistible!" "Look," says the nerd. "I'm a computer expert. I haven't got time for a girlfriend. But a talking frog- now, that's cool". **(Courtesy: *Readers' Digest*)**
Humans in a Wired World

The hallmark of human civilization today is defined by information and communication or info-communication technologies (ICTs), which consist of data processing, telephone, cellular and radio communication equipment, software, hardware and other electronic devices. 'Technological civilization of the Modern age', as Jacques Ellul described it in the 1960s, has transpired at present into 'digital civilization' in which personal computer (PC) is the principal tool of human activities and interactions. Computer is the '*emblematic machine*'[1] of the century, which directs human life as the Gutenberg's printing press did in the 15th century.

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1 Cf. McCorduck, P. *The Universal Machine. Confession of a Technological Optimist,* McGraw-Hill, 1985)

The striking phenomenon of the computer age is the use of Internet which has enabled the connectivity and communication of the human world through World Wide Web (WWW) and which has turned the world indeed into a 'global village' as Marshal McLuhan envisioned in the 60's. Through "annihilation of distance" and "death of time" by WWW one is in touch with the entire world and is able to have immediate information about someone or something from any corner of the globe. It is marvellous that one has instant access to the depository of information and knowledge galore.

The rapidity with which the digital networking of the human world has taken place is also phenomenal. After Gutenberg discovered printing press it took nearly a century to reach the mark of fifty million people who benefited from the print media and it took more than 38 years till radio reached same number of users. Similarly television took 13 years to reach the target of fifty million viewers, whereas in only four years World Wide Web has exceeded the fifty million customers and the growth rate of the Internet clientele is very remarkable indeed. It is estimated that nearly a hundred million humans are now "on-line" and the growth rate of persons getting connected online is ten percent per month. Lonny J. Brown asserts in her book, *Enlightenment in Our Time: The Perennial Wisdom in the New Millennium* that 'PC-based communications will soon become as ubiquitous as phones, fax, TV, and ground mail, and probably even more significant as a universal agent of social change'. Email communication has pierced even to remote corners of the world where basic facilities are still lacking. I was really amused a few years ago when an email reached my mailbox from a friend of mine working in a remote village which is still to be linked to the nearby town through asphalt road and transport service! Digital communication revolution has superseded industrial revolution also in the developing countries like India, and its influence is far-reaching and more widespread than all other revolutions that the world has seen. Nicholas Negroponte in his book, *Being Digital,* calls this revolution 'a 10.5 on the Richter scale of social change' which is opening up new vistas of development and growth for the entire world. "We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation similar to the present, hath not appeared since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand" - What Thomas Payne wrote in his pamphlet *Common Sense* in 1775 could be very well repeated thanks to the new prospectus for

social change and the latest facet of human civilisation ushered in by digital communication.

Digital Civilisation

Civilisation of each epoch has its own specific characteristics. The predominant mark of digital age is the dearth of information available at the click of the mouse. As Lonny J. Brown says 'the Internet is a pulsating earth-encompassing net of countless millions of energetically-linked, computerized "intelligence nodes", each directly and instantaneously accessible to all the others. This omni-distributed array allows the human minds positioned at those terminals to become potentially cognizant of the collective knowledge and ideas of everyone else'.[2] Online encyclopaedias like ***Wikipeadia*** with more than 125,000 entries offer three times more information than a traditional encyclopaedia in print-form like ***Encyclopaedia Britannica*** with their numerous thick volumes. Moreover, reference websites and e-books available online are also accessible faster than the printed versions and that to a very affordable cost. The recent entrant in the domain of online encyclopaedias, **Live Web,** with its real and dynamic content, offers the latest information on varied subjects with ever changing updates of the facts and figures. As Walter J. Ong says, "The spoken word, centre of human life, is overgrown with its excrescences – script, print and electronic verbalism"[3].

It is not only the volume of information available online is remarkable but the cost of attaining it is also much cheaper than the printed version. The portals of knowledge are kept open round the clock even for the poorest of the poor in the world. 'Life and health enhancing information and the riches of many cultures in the world is made available even to the ordinary people by Internet'.[4] Experts or amateurs – everyone in all walks of life have opened up their own websites and make their expertise available for anyone who is ready to surf through the web world. S.V. Raghavan, Professor of Computer Science at IIT-Chennai, ascertains

2 Cf. Brown, L.J., *Enlightenment in our Time,* Booklocker, 2001

3 Ong, W. J., *The Presence of the Word,* Yale University Press, New Haven, 1967, p.314

4 Cf. Keniston, K., "The Four Digital Divides" in: Kenneth Keniston & Deepak Kumar, Eds. *IT Experience in India: Bridging the Digital Divide,* Sage Publication, New Delhi, 2004, pp.11-36, here p.12).

that communication technology by transmitting gigabits through fibre optic medium and megabits through the wireless medium can enable the flow of stockpiles of information from village to village in order to enhance the social and economic status of the rural population. Through ICTs "the villagers can have access to high quality medical help, quality education and relevant information pertaining to crops, fertilizers, entertainment and access to Internet as their urban counterparts"[5]. Internet serves an excellent and effective pedagogical tool for formal as well as non-formal education. Video conferencing, e-learning, online tutorials, virtual classrooms and universities, etc. are no more Greek and Latin in the academic circles even in a developing country.

There is a lot of clamour about e-governance in the country in the recent years. There is much to be done to provide the people with the basic necessities nevertheless linking the rural panchayat offices thorough Internet is already on the agenda of the state as well as central government. To name a few reasons even for a hardcore socialist not to object to such an apparently extravagant step with huge financial constraint: the prospectus of high speed flow of information even to the remotest corners of the country, active participation in the political administration through online interaction and transparency of governance via Internet. Online governance offers better scope for deterring corruption and to help the common man to participate in the exercise of his political franchise as the citizen. Hence, digital age offers prospectus for the enhanced quality of a free and democratic society.

Online communication has also created a boom in commerce and trade. Availability of commodities and affordability of the probable consumer are instantly positioned on the cyber market, which makes the trade cost-effective and sales very efficient and profitable. The 'rationality of the market' is regulated online and the essential goods are made available to everyone within a few seconds. "Access to information is defined as an instrument to increase economic prosperity and to improve health"[6] and information and communication technology could also bridge the gap between global economy and local communities through free flow of needed information on the products and through

5 *The Hindu* 11.01.2006

6 Keniston 2004, p.24

online interactive communication. P.D Kaushik enumerates the benefits of Internet for trade and commerce to justify the preference of Internet to other means of communication: a) Low cost of providing customisation, b) low cost of interactivity, c) low cost of providing timely updates of information, d) low marginal cost of service to additional users, e) low marginal cost of additional service to the same user and f) lower transaction cost and low fixed cost of the server.[7]

Internet has also created new forms of communities. Space and distance have been overcome by WWW and people group together through digital communication on the basis of their ideology and aspiration, however far they may be physically. Social movements and religious communities attract their supporters and followers by their propaganda in the Internet and recruit their clientele through online registration, which is timesaving and sparing. Mobilisation of the anti-globalisation protesters during the annual meetings of WTO and G7 countries' summit against the unbridled liberation of the world economy at the cost of the weaker sections of the society was swift, instant, impressive thanks to online communication.

However, not everything is rosy with digital revolution. Despite the tall claim of technocrats hardly 5 percent of the world population of 6 billion had Internet connection by the year 2002. Can or will this five percent ***netizens*** (citizens who are online) improve the conditions of the 95 percent ordinary citizens of the world? "Alongside the optimism and hype surrounding the Information Age, new voices noted that most people, on most countries of the world, remained completely untouched by this revolution". For example, 'in mid-2002 there were probably 1 million Internet connections in India, most of them in institutional settings like schools and government offices rather than individual households. Assuming that three computer and Internet users per household there are 6 million Indians who have computer access at home and perhaps 3 million who have Internet access. That means, with the population of one billion in 2002 in India less than one percent of the population had home access to computer and 0.5 percent had home access to Internet'.[8] Hence, it could be very well said that Information Age has become

7 Cf. Keniston K. & Kumar, D., Eds. *IT Experience in India: Bridging the Digital Divide,* Sage Publication, New Delhi, 2004,

8 Cf. Keniston, 2004, pp.12-13

another distinctive mark of disparity between the haves and the have-nots and it has also steered in "digital divide" into the human society. It is a tiny group of rich, successful and English-speaking minority which is online in India while many of 700,000 Indian villages do not still have a telephone connection and a number of the rural Indians have not made a single telephone call in their lifetime. Access to Internet belongs to the realm of the rich as the poor are still struggling for their basic needs.

With English as the *lingua franca* of the email communication and the USA as the hub of domain launchers in the cyberspace linguistic and cultural domination is another mark of the digital divide. In India, for example, it is hardly the 5% English-educated of the total population who have the advantage of using the digital communication. It is not an exaggeration to say that there is 'American cultural imperialism' or 'Anglo-Saxon linguistic and cultural hegemony' on the Internet, due to the emergence of number of websites from English-speaking countries. Digital age is breeding a new species of elites, the ***netizens***, - the so-called virtual citizens of the cyber world!

There is also another expert group in the IT-world whom Kenneth Keniston calls as "digeratis" who are the privileged beneficiaries and 'pundits' of information technologies. In 2004 there were 4.1 million computer software programmers IT experts in India and an addition of 67,785 fresheners join the band annually after university graduation. "Unlike the older Indian elites, the privileges of the new digerati are based not on the caste, inherited wealth, family connections or access to traditional rulers, but on a combination of education, brainpower, special entrepreneurial skills, and ability to stay on the 'cutting edge' of knowledge". The lifestyle of the digerati is cosmopolitan and their philosophy of life is a mixture of pragmatism and hedonism. A life without pain and social constraints, as well as, free of any perpetual and lasting commitment appears to be their ideology and they 'have disregard for convention and authority and indifference to the values of traditional hierarchies'.[9]

The strength of the digital world is the mastery over numbers and skill to manipulate them that gives a cutting edge in capturing the highest echelons in the IT world. Hence, the main objective of education in the digital age is to make the digerati more a 'numerate' than a 'literate'. A

9 ibid., pp. 17-19

digerati is rather a skilled person in harnessing the dynamics of the 'intellisphere' than an educated person inculcated with values like justice, equality, fraternity, social concern, etc. Due to the possibility to have volumes of information literally at the fingertips the digerati tends to lose the sense of awe and feeling of wonder for subtle nuances and small beauties of human life.

The ICT is the ingredient of new global economy. Technological revolution has consolidated the powers of capitalistic forces and has paved the way for a 'universal history' of humankind in the direction of 'liberal democracy'. Francis Fukuyama had predicted already how communication media would influence the course of human history as he indicates: "The enormous productive and dynamic world created by advancing technology and the rational organisation of labour has a tremendous homogenizing power. It is capable of linking different societies around the world to one another physically through creation of global markets, and of creating parallel economic aspirations and practices in a host of diverse societies. The attractive power of this world creates a very strong predisposition for all human societies to participate in it, while success in this participation requires the adoption of the principles of economic liberalism. This is the ultimate victory of VCR (video cassette recorder)".[10] Electronic communication has reached a very advanced level that it has become the strong pillar of globalisation of free market and the specialists of the cyber world are the prophets of neo-capitalism, which is the backbone of the unbridled liberalisation of world economy. Multinational corporations (MNC) and trans-national corporations (TNC) have capitalised on the use of info-communication system and have consolidated their grip on the world economy dictating terms to state authorities. Hence, ICT is also in a way responsible for the escalating digital divide between the poor and the rich.

Cyberspace is also used as the theatre of heinous crimes, violence and terrorism. There is a standing accusation since the inception of Internet, and not without valid reasons, that Internet is also a breeding place of anti-social activities such as pornography, child abuse, Nazi propaganda, etc. Internet enables terrorism to engage in clandestine brutal activities without being nabbed easily. The terror of 9/11, 2001

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10 Fukuyama, F., *The End of History and the Last Man*, The Free Press, New York, 1992, p.48

'the first war of Information Age', as Richard B. Meyers, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff called it, divulged the fact that Internet is effectively used for terrorising the human society. Moreover, post 9/11 world is witnessing helplessly as 'media and militancy walk hand in hand in a blissful and bittersweet union'. ICT offers the USA "real-time connectivity" to a variety of armed forces-naval, air, ground and Special Operations- operating over seven thousand miles away. Indeed, wherever forces are deployed-from some 267 bases, in some thirty locations in fifteen different countries, or while overflying forty-six independent nations in the course of operations-they are actually able to "see" the battlefield by means of sophisticated computerised data-linking and imaging as events unfold'.[11] Infotainment is the epitome for the live-shows of the military manoeuvres of the imperialistic aggrandizement in the recent times.

Religious Quest in the Cyberspace

Relation between religion and scientific development has never been on even grounds. For example, from being suspicious and critical of electronic media like radio and television religion has learned gradually to exploit them for its purpose and both have influenced each other mutually. As Jay Newman points out, 'new media technologies have been responsible in no small measure for the ability of humanity not only to refine religion but also to constructively *reconceive* it'.[12] Televangelism has become a regular practice of almost all the denominations and the live telecast of religious programmes and ceremonies attract equal number of viewers and revenues like any other modern soap operas if not more. Religion uses the electronic media for its traditional practices like worship, education, propaganda and formation of religious communities. The clips of high-tech gurus with laptops and videophones speeding up in charted jets - are not imaginary descriptions of a religious cynic and religion and Internet are not strange bedfellows either!

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11 Hadley, M. L., "Ascension of Mars and the Salvation of the Modern World", in: David J. Hawkin, Ed. *The Twentieth Century Confronts Its Gods*, State University of New York, Press, New York, 2004, pp. 189-208, here 190-196

12 Newman, J., "Media Technology and the Future of Religions", in: David J. Hawkin, Ed. *The Twentieth Century Confronts Its Gods*, pp. 79-94, here p.85

Fascination with and utilisation of ICTs by religion is very instantaneous and astonishing. Surfing the Internet for information on religion with search engines like Google leads one to thousands and thousands of hits. Marlena Tarrell in her book, *God Is Alive On The Internet,* describes how religion exploits the benefits of digital revolution. What is amazing is not only the number of websites but also the varieties of topics linked to religion available in the cyberspace. Internet offers a spectrum of religious websites from highly abstract theological articles to prove the existence of God and to the description of an utterly trivial and superstitious esoteric practice. Number of congregations, which use Internet for communication and interaction with their members, is also racketing faster day-by-day. For example, according to a survey conducted in 1997 by Hartford Institute for Religion Research, only 11 percent of the 550 congregations had launched their own websites and another study in 1998 on 1236 congregations revealed that 18% of them had websites. In 2000 Barna Research Group's survey of the pastors brought to light that 30% of their churches owned websites and in 2001 another study showed that 43% of the congregations hosted their own websites and it was projected then that in five years time 90% of the congregations would be online. Internet has become the *online ashram* of digital age gurus, where they meet and communicate with their devotees! Proliferation of religious websites in the cyberspace shows that religion has learnt to tap the advantages of the information and communication technology. As Loony J Brown says 'there is Spirit in the Cyberspace and increasing number of *cyber-pilgrims* are accessing it'.

What is significant about the religious websites is that a large number of them are preoccupied with the spiritual quest of human beings. There are number of hits under the title: spirituality. It is one of the recurring themes in the cyber world. If spirituality is understood as the way of life and the way of being related first and foremost to oneself, then to others, and also to nature and eventually to God, then Internet offers a better scope to come in contact with these four aspects of human encounter. Cyberspace is an interactive meeting point of interpersonal relationship and it is a virtual habitat of real persons who cherish a longing for communion and transcendence. As Peter Russell says in *The Global Brain Awakens* the Net is an imagined territory with a real spirituality in it. The potential marriage of science and wisdom, the

bourgeoning interest in development, and the possibility of direct transference of higher status of consciousness are still combining to make it possible, for the first time in history, for the wisdom of the perennial philosophy to take a firm and lasting hold. Web and email communications are well used by the spiritual gurus of the digital age to augment their clout over their followers and Internet propagates a spectrum of spiritualities. Before proceeding further to know how Internet helps spirituality let me first focus the search on knowing what spirituality is.

What is Spirituality?

Spirituality is a word, though constantly used, very difficult to define or describe in acceptable terms to all. In fact it was really frustrating to arrive at a tenable definition in spite my familiarity with the subject and usage of the literature on it. Nevertheless, let me venture on! Spirituality refers to many aspects of human life, and as Edward Kinerk says, it is basically a 'life-style'. "A person's spirituality is the way in which he or she lives in accordance with basic values".[13] It presumes a belief system someone holds on to and which justifies all his/her actions and spirituality ultimately gives direction to his/her life as well. Spirituality is not accidental and momentary or impulsive behaviour rather it presupposes certain amount of permanency and continuity. In the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar spirituality is "the way in which (an individual) acts and reacts habitually throughout his life according to his objective and ultimate insights and decisions".[14] It is an art of *Weltanschauung,* an outlook, through which an individual judges, decides and acts!

Spirituality is also relational in the sense that it is also concerned about how one relates to oneself, to others, to nature and eventually to God. However, spirituality is presented in the contemporary age in a secular garb dissecting its link with religion if not with God. There are people now who say: "I am spiritual but I am not religious!" Interest in a religion-less spirituality is gaining ground because of the polarised

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13 E. Kinerk S.J., "Toward a Method for the Study of Spirituality", in: M. Gorman, Gorman, M., Ed., *Psychology and Religion*, Paulist Press, New York, 1985, pp.320-324, here p.320

14 von Balthasar, H.U., he Gospel as Norm and Test of All Spirituality in the Church" in: C. Duquoc, Ed., *Spirituality in the Church,* Concilium Vol. 9, 1965, p. 7

understanding of religion, namely religion as mystic experience and religion as an institution. However, as Abraham Maslow says 'a profoundly religious person integrates both the mystical and legalistic and the institutional element in a religion and lives a spirituality that is the sum total of mystical experiences and religious practices'.[15] Spirituality is a middle path as virtue lies in the middle!

Justice cannot be done to the study of spirituality if the transcendent aspect of human life is not given its due place. Spiritual life is the sum total of responses which one makes to what is perceived as the inner call of God and "when the individual has decided to make this call the centre of activity and choice, he or she may be called a spiritual person".[16] Such an understanding of spirituality recognises the usefulness of certain practices and exercises in order to grow as a spiritual person. Prayer, meditation and contemplation, etc. are in that sense necessary tools of spiritual growth. Contemplation, according to Thomas Merton, is "the response to the call of God, Who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being: for we ourselves are words of His". Through contemplation the spiritual person realises his/her self as an *imago Dei* and becomes aware of the final destination of this life, which is none other than the union with the Eternal Being. Therefore, "contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, and fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realisation of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It knows the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes beyond reason and simple faith".[17]

Though spirituality is preoccupied with the self and its dealing with the Eternal Source is no way locked up with the self alone, i.e. it is far

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15 Cf. Maslow, A., *Religion, Values and Peak Experiences,* Viking, New York, 1970

16 Groeschel, B. J., *Spiritual Passages. The Psychology of Spiritual Development*, Claretian Publication, Bangalore, 2003, p.4).

17 Merton, T., *Seeds of Contemplation*, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, 1972, pp.5-6

from being individualistic and self-complacent. Spirituality necessarily leads to the other. As Gutierrez says in his book, *We Drink From Our Own Wells. The Spiritual Journey of a People,* genuine spirituality is spontaneously expressed through the solidarity with 'the dispossessed and marginalized' and by facing even 'martyrdom' in their struggle for liberation. Authentic spiritual person is in midst of the world though he/she is not of the world. He/she permeates the world through his/her radiance stemming from the encounter with God. Such a spiritual person plants in the world the seeds of contemplation and nourishes the world with the fruits of his/her encounter with the Eternal Source! Thus spirituality leads one to perfect harmony with oneself, with others and also with the entire nature thanks to one's encounter and union with God.

Spirituality, moreover, is sustained and tinted by the belief system (theology) that it holds on or by the charisma of the extraordinary person who through his/her spiritual endeavour leaves footprints on shore of human life for others to tread upon. Due to its affiliation spirituality flows into many streams such as Hindu spirituality, Christian spirituality, Eco spirituality, etc. The core of Christian spirituality is the person and message of Jesus Christ. As Michael Downey says, 'Christian spirituality, both as a lived experience and an academic discipline, describes first and foremost the whole of the Christian's life as this is oriented to self-transcending knowledge, freedom, and love in the light of the ultimate values and highest ideals perceived and pursued in the mystery of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit in the church, the community of disciples. That is to say, spirituality is concerned with everything that constitutes Christian experience, specifically the perception and pursuit of the highest ideal or goal of Christian life, namely, an ever more intense union with God disclosed in Christ through life in the Spirit. At a second level, Christian spirituality as an interdisciplinary academic discipline attempts to study religious experience and to promote its development and maturation'.[18] Spirituality, however, in Christian understanding, is not preoccupied with some other life or the life after death but with human life in all its facets, with all its agonies and pains, joys and ecstasies, toils and struggles, successes and failures, etc.

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18 Downey, Michael, Ed. *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, The Liturgical Press, 1992

Spirituality, therefore, is a sense of Oneness with oneself, Oneness with nature and Oneness with everything and ultimately Oneness with God. A deeply spiritual person recognises him/her identity in everyone and in everything and tries to nurture this relatedness with utmost care and concern. Such a person addresses the sun as 'brother', calls the gushing brook and blowing wind as 'sister', and even a fierce wolf that is ready to jump on is loving brother to him/her! A truly spiritual person sees the colour of god's skin on the lush green leaves and on feathers of a dark crow!! According to the Vedic text spirituality is the *'theanthropocosmic integration'* of human person with nature as well as with God who is the primordial source and ultimate goal of human life".[19] Therefore, as Philip Sheldarke declares, 'the challenge to any spirituality is to show how its vision of God may contribute powerfully to the desire to find communion with others, express compassion for others and transform the world'[20]. In order to do this task in an effective and fruitful way spirituality could use the information and communication technologies. There comes the contribution of the ICTs for spirituality.

Info-Communication Technologies and Spirituality

First and foremost Internet offers better scope to be linked to others on the other end of the globe. Distance and time are easily overcome through digital media and communication is established in the virtual space but between real persons. Cyberspace is the meeting point of everyone without any distinction of gender, language, caste, colour and even religion. Online communication creates a collective consciousness and makes the ultimate aim of spirituality to arrive at oneness with everyone. Loony J. Brown describes this wonder of the digital world very exuberantly. 'In a complex interactive feedback process between creator and creation, the knowledge-base of the digital realm is continuously being downloaded into human consciousness. ....The visionary French philosopher, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, posited a "Noosphere," an emerging global super-consciousness known and experienced by all. We may soon see the moment in history when at

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19 Cf. Sivaraman K., *Hindu Spirituality: Vedas Through Vedanta* Vol. I, Motilal Banarsidass Publication, Delhi, 1995, p. 26

20 Cf. Sheldrake, P. *Spirituality and Theology*, Darton & Longmann, London, 1998, p. 202

least most people most of the time realize their underlying Unity with everyone else and the world, and begin to behave accordingly'.[21]

Internet, with its depository of information and facets of knowledge in the virtual libraries, offers access to various resources and methods of spiritual experience, which is helpful to study spirituality as an academic discipline with ecumenical and inter-religious sensibility. With plethora of scriptural texts from all religions and various spiritual masters available in the cyberspace Internet helps an individual seeker to choose the spiritual stimulant suitable for his/her needs. A very much individualised and personal spiritual guidance is possible for a number of people through email communication and through digital media one can have immediate interaction with his/her spiritual guru/mentor. As L. J. Brown acclaims this possibility in the cyberspace has made human spiritual quest so democratic and so personal that all religions, sects, texts, and teachers await your consideration. No seeker is any longer limited to someone else's idea of what one should know or believe. Moreover, the anonymity of the Internet identity helps the individual to overcome shyness and hesitation to speak about their problems and to find answers for the queries of life. SNAEHA, a recently launched website in Chennai for counselling and guidance for those who attempt suicide, has found very good resonance among young people also because of its assurance for anonymity.

In spite of the digital divide we have also to acknowledge that ICT has created a digital identity and formed virtual communities built on certain ideologies. Websites have also altered the way in which members of a congregation interact with each other. Internet has opened up the possibility of live interaction among the members and between the leaders and members through video conferencing and other fibre optic transmission. There is a greater opportunity for instant contact with others through email communication. Richard Thieme, a writer and lecturer specializing in the impact of technology on culture, says: "Our transition from a print culture to a digital one is as profound a shift in human consciousness as that created by the move from oral culture to written, or written to printed. Our interaction with computers has given birth to new forms of religious community".[22] Moreover, digital media

21 Cf. Brown, Lonny J., 2001

22 Quoted in Loony J. Brown, 2001

breeds a culture of mutual respect and equality because in the Cyberspace we are enabled, encouraged and perhaps even forced to treat every individual as a true equal as we do not know really who is sitting in front of the other system that is sending and receiving messages. Thanks to religious resources available in the cyberspace the authority of and the need for institutionalised religion and the mode of pastoral care are challenged. 'Online-Religion' demands to discern on new ways of catering to the spiritual needs of the religious communities.

However, there are also pitfalls for spirituality due to digital communication. Interaction only through virtual media may also deter emotional bond and personal contact that is more likely to be tangible in the interpersonal interactions. Communication only through electronic verbalism will also hinder real encounter or may lead to superficial and arbitrary dealings, which would sometimes cause more harm to the persons involved than no contact at all. There is also the impending danger of stuffing the other online-partner with false information and create inauthentic and unrealistic expectations in human relationships. Furthermore, email relationship may be pursued rather out of morbid curiosity and fascination with the electronic media than with genuine concern for the real person on the other end of the optic terminal. In that case ICT can, to a certain extent, be an obstacle for spirituality than a helpful medium.

Spirituality and the WWW

After all the descriptions about the utility of the ICTs for spirituality I don't venture to conclude that there is a discipline called *Internet spirituality* or *digital spirituality*. Spirituality assisted by the tools of cyberspace cannot be in any way different from the traditional understanding of it. ICTs cannot create a spirituality of their own, because they are rarely goods in themselves but rather instruments in the pursuit of other goals. However, as Keniston points out they are useful 'as a potential instrument in meeting other humans, for social, cultural, economic or political purposes'. Moreover, ICT can give undisturbed access to spiritual texts and spiritual experiences of others, which can inspire one to pursue his/her spiritual journey and will be useful to study spirituality as an academic discipline. Cyberspace could, therefore, serve as a forum of healthy communication and fruitful dialogue for exchanging the spiritual experiences with others. Access to other religious heritage

and traditions and spiritual techniques through Internet could help to build up a tolerant and harmonious mind-set up and create a human community rooted in peace and fraternity. A recent Editorial in Scientific American extols the contribution of the ICTs for world peace as follows: "Computer networking offers the soundest basis for world peace that has yet been presented. International computer networks will knit together the peoples of the world in bonds of mutual respect: its possibilities are vast, indeed".[23]

Through its Internet connectivity ICT creates new hope for a better, harmonious and just world. So much so, the IT experts are very optimistic and assertive to say that ICT is an effective tool of an egalitarian society. Lonny J. Brown declares that after decades dominated by nationalism and militarism, there is a new hope for humanity restored by the promise of the coming global consciousness thanks to WWW. For a country like India Internet is the best medium of national integration and communal harmony provided the majority are online. "A wide range of disparities-income inequalities, rural-urban inequalities, inter-regional inequalities, inter-caste and religious inequalities, and gender inequalities-mark Indian society. The introduction of any new means of information exchange among its people will definitely have an impact on their social relationships, and can gradually change the framework of the society".[24]

Finally, though ICTs could be very helpful for human quest for transcendence, the new breed of netizens of the cyber-world, the digerati, may not serve as ideal role models of spiritual seekers or guides due to their apparent philosophy and way of life. Spirituality, whether it is for digerati or for illiterate, should emerge from the core of one's self, embrace the other person as well as the entire world and aspire for the ultimate union with the primordial Source and Summit of all beings so that IT will be all in all.

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23 Ibid.

24 Kaushik, P. D., An Agenda: Electronic Governance for the Poor" in Kenneth Keniston & Deepak Kumar, Eds. *IT Experience in India: Bridging the Digital Divide,* Sage Publication, New Delhi, 2004, pp.98-130, here p. 119

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